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The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Is it all right to read Somerset Maugham?

by Joseph Epstein

The critic I am waiting for is the one who will explain why, with all my faults, I have been read for so many years by so many people.
—W. Somerset Maugham

"Four powers govern men: avarice, lust, fear, and snobbishness." Somerset Maugham didn't write that; Hilaire Belloc did. But Somerset Maugham, I think it fair to say, believed it. Avarice, lust, fear, and snobbishness are Maugham's great subjects; they are everywhere in his work, as theme, as motive, as background. Small wonder that they would be, for the same dark quartet—avarice, lust, fear, and snobbishness—were also the four reigning qualities in Somerset Maugham's own triumphant, lengthy, and finally rather sad life.

Cyril Connolly once called Somerset Maugham the "last of the great professional writers." He meant it as an honorific. It has not always been taken that way. One small step down from the professional writer is the hack; one large step up is the artist. A great many more critics have been willing to drop Maugham a step than have been willing to raise him a step. Maugham was always highly conscious of this; and one could string together a quite long necklace composed of the BB's he shot over his lifetime at highbrow critics, small-public writers, intellectual-magazine editors, and others who accorded his work less respect than he thought it deserved. "But you must remember the intelligentsia despise me," Maugham in late life told his nephew Robin Maugham. "Take that magazine that's indoors. What's it called? *Encounter*? Well, all the writers on *Encounter* despise me completely. I read it just to find out what's going on and what people are interested in. But I must confess I find it terribly boring." Not the least interesting item in that snippet of conversation is that, whatever his professed views of *Encounter,* Maugham nevertheless subscribed to and read it. He was a man who didn't miss much.

Before considering the quality of Somerset Maugham's writing, the first thing that must be said about him is that he was a very smart man. He was smart about people, absolutely brilliant about their motivations, and nearly a genius at understanding that haziest and most elusive of essential subjects, human nature. He fancied himself a man of few illusions—as don't we all—but in his case he was probably correct to do so. Another word for a man with few illusions is a cynic; whether it is the correct word is a tangled question. So intent was Maugham on his illusionlessness that he was often called a cynic, a charge he resented. In Oscar Wilde's famous formulation, a cynic is someone "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." But Maugham knew both price and value. He also knew that happiness, if it existed, was not for him.

Along with his high intelligence, Maugham had the quality that he himself referred to, in

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his stories as well as in his autobiographical writings, as character. As Maugham used the term, character has nothing to do with goodness; it is shorn of all moral meaning. Those who have character are not necessarily winning or even particularly likable. People with character can be quite intelligent but intelligence alone does not constitute character for Maugham. Instead character is a quality of inner discipline; it comes with having knocked the weakness out of oneself. Having character means that you are someone who cannot be trifled with; you are not negligible; you are a force to be reckoned with; you are serious. Having character may also mean, if you happen to be Somerset Maugham, that, no matter how wealthy you are, each morning you sit down at your desk, do your work, and end with a bibliography that includes twenty-eight books of fiction, twelve of nonfiction, and thirty produced plays. "Genius," Maugham wrote to his friend, the painter Gerald Kelly, "is a combination of talent and character, but character to a certain extent—I do not know how much, but I believe enormously—can be acquired . . . ." Late in his life he told Desmond MacCarthy that he thought he had more character than brains and more brains than talent.

Somerset Maugham's own character was formed against substantial obstacles: he was orphaned at the age of ten, he had a humiliating stammer, he was a homosexual—this last a fact which he attempted to hide, against which he struggled (going, at one point, so far as to marry and to produce a daughter), and with which he finally came to terms without ever feeling it anything more than a bad card dealt him by life. Much of his early life is recorded in the opening chapters of his novel *Of Human Bondage.* He issued his young hero in that novel, Philip Carey, a clubfoot in place of the stammer life had issued him. But otherwise he records fairly accurately the circumstances of his birth in Paris in 1874, where his father, an English lawyer appointed to handle the British Embassy's legal affairs, and his mother raised Maugham's three older brothers; and where his mother, who was consumptive, died in childbirth when he was eight, the great and unhealable wound in his, Somerset Maugham's, life. His father died two years later, of cancer of the stomach, and the ten-year-old Maugham was sent to live with his father's only surviving brother, an Anglican clergyman living in the provincial town of Whitstable, and his wife, the childless couple who supplied the models for the arid, unimaginative, and penny-pinching Reverend William and Mrs. Carey in *Of Human Bondage.* Thus the first requisite for a writer, an unhappy childhood, was amply met by the young Willie Maugham.

In Ted Morgan's lengthy and very capable biography of Somerset Maugham[1] there occurs a sentence that might be inserted onto the floppy disc of every word-processor-owning biographer of any English writer who went off to school in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century; the sentence reads: "He was small and frail and in poor health, was no good at games, and, inhibited by his stammer [this will need to be altered in specific cases], he shrank from his fellow students." Maugham was sent to King's School in Canterbury. It was not one of the great English public schools; it had no cachet, a point of some interest for the snob Maugham was later to become. The plan was for Maugham, whose youthful intelligence raised him to the top of his class, to win a scholarship to Oxford, and thence to become ordained. Maugham, however, had other plans. From earliest adolescence he had wanted to become a writer.

Maugham was small ("The world," he wrote, "is an entirely different place to a man of five foot seven from what it is to the man of six foot two"), stammering (of his contemporary Arnold Bennett's stammer he noted: "Few knew the distressing sense it gave rise to of a bar to complete contact with other men"), and cheated out of parental love (the only selfless love in the world, he believed, was that of a mother for her

1 *Maugham,* by Ted Morgan, was published by Simon & Schuster in 1980.

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child). Although not a Freudian, Maugham would doubtless have agreed with that apothegm of Freud's that has it that the artist forgoes fame, riches, and love for his art, through which he hopes to win fame, riches, and love. The fit, in his own case, was perfect.

From his earliest years there was little that Maugham did that did not bear upon his determination to be a writer. At sixteen, for example, he persuaded his guardian-uncle to permit him to leave King's School to study on his own in Heidelberg, where he would live on the £150 income from his small inheritance. In Heidelberg he read Schopenhauer and fell under the influence of the plays of Ibsen, a pair that does not exactly qualify as the Abbott & Costello of *fin-de-siècle* European culture. He entered into a homosexual affair. He produced a biography of the composer Meyerbeer, which, when he returned to England, he was unable to get published and subsequently destroyed.

Because he could not own up to his guardian his ambition to be a writer, Maugham, at age eighteen, entered medical school. A lesser-evil choice, medical school at least allowed the young Maugham the freedom of living on his own in London while granting him a view of the life of the underclasses as seen in the clinics of St. Thomas's teaching hospital in Lambeth Palace Road on the south bank of the Thames. Medicine also provided useful lessons for a would-be writer. In *The Summing Up,* Maugham tells that, when he was unable to discover a certain nerve in the leg of a cadaver in the place his textbook said it would be, he was told by an instructor that the normal is the rarest thing in the world. Maugham in fact never practiced a single day as a physician, yet there is reason to believe he did not regret having gone to medical school. In an essay he later wrote entitled "The Short Story," in which he discusses Chekhov's career as a physician, Maugham noted:

> I have reasons for believing that the training a medical student has to go through is to a writer's benefit. He acquires a knowledge of human nature which is invaluable. He sees it at its best and at its worst. When people are ill, when they are afraid, they discard the mask which they wear in health. The doctor sees them as they really are, selfish, hard, grasping, cowardly; but brave too, generous, kindly and good. He is tolerant of their frailties, awed by their virtues.

Somerset Maugham never worked at any other job but that of writer over the course of his ninety-one years. He never descended to journalism, or worked as a publisher's reader, or took on literary or any other kind of odd jobs. He lived on his £150, not an impressive sum even then. Nor did success come quickly. He published a first novel, *Liza of Lambeth,* at twenty-three, which, though it garnered decent reviews, earned no serious income. He had book-length manuscripts rejected. He wrote plays that were produced but enjoyed only brief runs and others that were not produced at all. At one point he moved to Paris, where he lived, frugally, among English and American expatriate writers and painters, among whom was the businesslike Arnold Bennett, who suggested that Maugham share a mistress with him and a third party. But there was nothing of the bohemian about Maugham, who was an Edwardian under and atop the skin and who, though he took a serious interest in the avant-garde art of his day, wished to avoid the garret style of life that often produced it. It was only in 1907, at the age of thirty-three, that Maugham was able to strike the success gong with a comedy of manners entitled *Lady Frederick,* which ran for 442 performances in London. The music of that gong was something he had longed to hear, for Maugham was a money writer; as he would later aver, "Money was like a sixth sense without which you could not make the most of the other five." Henceforth all that he wrote turned to gold, piles and piles of gold.

Granted that accounting may be no proper part of literary criticism, the amounts of money Somerset Maugham earned by his pen are too impressive to be ignored. As a

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successful playwright, Ted Morgan asserts, Maugham "bridged the quarter century between Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward," which is chronologically accurate but leaves Shaw out of reckoning. Nonetheless, during these years Maugham always had a play or two running in London and New York theaters and at one point had four plays running concurrently in London's West End. (He generally took no more than three or four weeks to write a play.) No writer to this day has had more novels, stories, and plays turned into movies. There have thus far been two films made of *Of Human Bondage* and two of *The Razor's Edge.* The story "Rain," after its various stage and film adaptions, was said to have earned him more than $1 million in royalties. He was paid a $1 a word for his stories. *The Razor's Edge* (1944) sold 507,000 copies its first month in print; Doubleday's first printing for *Then and Now* (1946), an historical novel about Machiavelli, was 825,000 copies. Outside his study, he bought Impressionist paintings, and at a time when one could still do so cheaply. What is more—or, more precisely, what made more—he was sensible enough to turn over much of this money to an astute San Francisco stockbroker named Bert Alanson, who doubled and redoubled it.

The importance of money to Maugham can scarcely be overemphasized. He claimed it gave him independence, which it did, and allowed him to live exactly as he pleased, which was grandly. In 1926 he bought the house on Cap Ferrat, on the French Riviera, that King Leopold had originally built for his confessor; overlooking the bay of Villefranche, near Nice and Monte Carlo, it included eight acres of land and, under Maugham's ownership, had a staff of thirteen servants (and four dachshunds). Money also gave him entrée to smart society, which, if one may say so, tended to be a good deal smarter then than it is nowadays (one might meet there Winston Churchill or Moura Budberg or Max Beerbohm). While widening his social horizons, money broadened his subject matter; it made him worldly in a way that a writer who struggles ceaselessly for a living can never quite hope to be. As the Maughamish character named Ashenden says in the story entitled "Guilia Lazzari," "just as the advantage of culture is that it enables you to talk nonsense with distinction, so the habit of luxury allows you to regard its frills and furbelows with a proper contumely."

Not, one hastens to add, that Maugham ever showed anything faintly resembling contumely toward luxury, or smart society, or money and its many emoluments. There were in fact two, quite distinct Somerset Maughams: there was the Maugham who appears as the narrator of so many of the stories and of *Cakes and Ale* and *The Razor's Edge,* sometimes under his own name and sometimes under the name Ashenden; and there was the Maugham who lived outside the novels and stories. The first Maugham is one of the second Maugham's most impressive creations. He is every inch the man of the world, a cool hand, a clear head, an observer of philosophical temper who has seen everything and is shocked by nothing. He is the sympathetic gentleman in the beautifully made suit to whom, at the club over brandy and soda, you confess that you harbor murderous thoughts about your wife or have been the cause of your business partner's death or have been sleeping with your dearest friend's mistress. He is of the world yet slightly above it, detached yet not devoid of feeling, a man who holds out the prospect of understanding unaccompanied by harsh judgment.

Then there was the other, the off-the-page Maugham. He was a man never quite comfortable in his own skin, displeased about being short, frustrated and rendered shy by his stammer, endlessly worried about the world's knowing that he was a homosexual. This was the man who could brilliantly mock snobbery in his books yet could never rise above it in his life, so that his biographer could accurately write, "There were four categories of persons who had easy access to the Mauresque [the Villa Mauresque was the name of Maugham's estate at Cap Ferrat]: the titled, the wealthy, the

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famous, and attractive young men." This Maugham could be bitter—so dangerous in repartee that Elizabeth, Queen of England, once expressed nervousness about being seated next to him at dinner—remorseless in getting his own way, and utterly suspicious of other people's motives in their dealings with him. This was a tough, an often mean, an always difficult man who came by his dark views through dark experience.

A grave mistake would be to think this second Somerset Maugham in any wise a fool—after all, it was he who created the first Somerset Maugham. If he was acute at enunciating truths about other people, he was no less acute at understanding himself. In the second of the brief chapters of *The Summing Up,* for example, he can write: "I have been attached, deeply attached, to a few people; but I have been interested in men in general not for their own sakes, but for the sake of my work." That is a statement of remarkable candor about the ruthlessness of writers in pursuit of material. But you have to keep an eye out for the old fraud in him. At the end of the same paragraph from which I have just quoted, a paragraph in which he recounts how ordinary people are more interesting to the writer than celebrated ones, for the former's "idiosyncracies have had more chance to develop in the limited circle of their activity," he concludes on what I take to be a straight-out lie: "For my part I would much sooner spend a month on a desert island with a veterinary surgeon than with a prime minister." Still, the candor enormously outweighs the fraudulence, and I can think of no other modern writer with the introspection and courage to write a passage such as the following:

> My sympathies are limited. I can only be myself, and partly by nature, partly by the circumstances of my life, it is a partial self. I am not a social person. I cannot get drunk and feel a great love for my fellow-men. Convivial amusement has always somewhat bored me . . . . I do not much like being touched and I have always to make a slight effort over myself not to draw away when someone links his arm in mine. I can never forget myself . . . . Though I have been in love a good many times I have never experienced the bliss of requited love. I know that this is the best thing that life can offer and it is a thing that almost all men, though perhaps only for a short time, have enjoyed. I have most loved people who cared little or nothing for me and when people have loved me I have been embarrassed . . . . I have been jealous of my independence. I am incapable of complete surrender. And so, never having felt some of the fundamental emotions of normal men, it is impossible that my work should have the intimacy, the broad human touch and the animal serenity which the greatest writers alone can give.

Although Maugham had married and had a daughter—his wife was Syrie Wellcome Maugham, with whom he shared a bitter divorce and who went on to become a rather famous interior decorator—he was in the final if not in the first analysis a homosexual. "You see," his nephew Robin Maugham reports him as saying in *Conversations With Willie,* "I was a quarter normal and three-quarters queer, but I tried to persuade myself it was the other way round. That was my greatest mistake." The central love affair of Maugham's life was with a very handsome and very alcoholic young man named Gerald Haxton, who served as his general factotum and who, while on the sauce, specialized in making hideously embarrassing scenes. Theirs was an affair in the Maughamian mode, one very much of human bondage, with each man bound to the other without either deriving anything like prolonged contentment from it.

Maugham was resigned to his homosexuality. "One day," Robin Maugham reports him saying, "it will be realized that there are people who are *born* homosexual or bisexual and that there is nothing whatever they can do about it." But he was never very pleased about his homosexuality. What he had to say on the subject of homosexuality was not something you would care to read aloud on Christopher Street at next year's, or any other year's, Gay Alliance parade. In a bril-

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liant essay on El Greco toward the close of *Don Fernando,* his book about Spanish culture in its golden age, he surmised that El Greco, an artist he much admired, was himself a homosexual. He went on to catalogue what he, Maugham, took to be the limitations of homosexuals in the arts:

> Now it cannot be denied that the homosexual has a narrower outlook on the world than the normal man. In certain respects the natural responses of the species are denied to him. Some at least of the broad and typical human emotions he can never experience. However subtly he sees life he cannot see it whole. If it were not for the perplexing *Sonnets* I should say that the homosexual can never reach the supreme heights of genius.

A paragraph later he continues:

> I should say that a distinctive trait of the homosexual is a lack of deep seriousness over certain things that normal men take seriously. This ranges from an inane flippancy to a sardonic humour. He has a wilfulness that attaches importance to things that most men find trivial and on the other hand regards cynically the subjects which the common opinion of mankind has held essential to its spiritual welfare. He has a lively sense of beauty, but is apt to see beauty especially in decoration. He loves luxury and attaches peculiar value to elegance. He is emotional, but fantastic. He is vain, loquacious, witty and theatrical. With his keen insight and quick sensibility he can pierce the depths, but in his innate frivolity he fetches up from them not a priceless jewel but a tinsel ornament. He has small power of invention, but a wonderful gift for delightful embroidery. He has vitality, brilliance, but seldom strength. He stands on the bank, aloof and ironical, and watches the river of life flow on. He is persuaded that opinion is no more than prejudice . . . .

As Maugham surmised that El Greco was a homosexual, so one can only surmise that, in putting together this impressive catalogue, Maugham, not publicly known to his readers as a homosexual, was cunningly commenting on the limitations of his own art. Does it make any sense to consider Maugham essentially a homosexual writer—a figure, if you will pardon the expression, in Gay Lit? I, for one, do not think it does. True, in his fiction he tended to be hard on women, but certainly no harder than that figure from Hetero Lit., Norman Mailer. He did not write convincingly about family life—his one attempt at doing so, inserting the family of Athelny Thorpe at the close of *Of Human Bondage,* reads like a poor parody of Dickens—but then neither did Flaubert. More important, unlike so many other modern homosexual writers, from E. M. Forster to Genet to Gore Vidal, Maugham was an altogether apolitical writer; he never sold his artistic birthright, as in another context Max Beerbohm once said of John Galsworthy, for "a pot of message." No, Somerset Maugham was not a homosexual writer but instead that quite different thing, a writer who happened to be a homosexual.

Maugham thought of himself, interestingly, as a professional humorist, which in his stories he calls himself more than a few times, and in one of his Ashenden stories, "The Traitor," he speaks of "the pleasant comedy of life." He meant this, I believe, in the sense in which one speaks of the human comedy. He put his case in *The Summing Up,* where he wrote: "A sense of humour leads you to take pleasure in the discrepancies of human nature; it leads you to mistrust great professions and look for the unworthy motive that they conceal; the disparity between appearance and reality diverts you and you are apt when you cannot find it to create it." If the humorist sometimes misses truth, beauty, and goodness, he is nonetheless tolerant, for he has no interest in moralizing but is "content to understand; and it is true that to understand is to pity and forgive."

While there was nothing of the aesthete about Maugham, nor any aesthetic difficulty about his work, few modern writers have been clearer about their own aesthetic pro-

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gram and, with the exceptions of Paul Valéry and Henry James, perhaps none has thought more trenchantly about the aesthetic questions raised by literary creation. Maugham thought, for example, that the artist is not justified in wishing to be judged by his intention; for him the crucial moment in the aesthetic transaction is that of communication—that moment when the work of art addresses the viewer or listener or reader. He thought talent to be made up of a natural aptitude for creation combined with a strong outlook on life shorn of the prejudices of the current day. "Sometimes," he wrote in *Don Fernando,* "there will be found a man who has this facility for writing to an extraordinary degree and to this joins an outlook on life which is not only peculiar to himself, but appeals to all men, and then he will be called a genius." Once, when asked the secrets of his own craft by a Chinese professor, he replied: "I know only two. One is to have common sense and the other is to stick to the point."

Maugham may also have been among the best read of modern writers. He never travelled any distance without a laundry bag filled with books, and he read, as one would imagine, with penetration. He adored the Russian novelists and admired Stendhal. The French called him the English Maupassant, which pleased him greatly. He thought Kipling and Chekhov, along with Maupassant, the ablest of the world's short-story writers. He had mixed feelings about Henry James, on the one hand thinking him amusingly absurd and finding himself unable to believe in the motivations of the characters in his fiction and on the other hand remarking, in his essay "Some Novelists I Have Known": "the fact remains that those last novels of his, notwithstanding their unreality, make all other novels, except the very best, unreadable." But generally he expressed his own personal preference for the straightforward over the ornate, for among prose writers he preferred Dryden and Hazlitt and Arnold and Cardinal Newman over Dr. Johnson and De Quincey and Carlyle and Pater. Here he joined the majority in preferring those who are most like himself.

One cannot read much in Maugham without recognizing that his own straightforward prose style came into being as a result of conscious artistry. He was a careful student of prose, which he wrote about extremely well in an essay on Edmund Burke as well as in *Don Fernando* and in *The Summing Up.* As a beginning novelist, he wrote under the influence of Pater and Oscar Wilde and other of the late Victorian decorative-prose stylists. He soon enough realized he had no talent in this line and set out to write more plainly, taking Swift as his model. (In later life he claimed he would have done better to have studied Dryden.) His own gifts, he recognized, were not poetical: lyricism was not his cup of tea, nor charming metaphors and cogent similes his sugar and milk. What he did have was clarity, logic, and an appreciation for euphonic language. On the subject of the formation of his own prose style, he wrote; "I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought with pains I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed. On taking thought it seemed to me that I must aim at lucidity, simplicity and euphony."

Maugham's was a strong and a serviceable style. His prose tended to be more elegant when he was writing essays than when he was writing novels and stories. He himself remarked, in his essay on Edmund Burke's prose, that the most settled styles in the history of English prose belonged to essayists, divines, and historians, and that too settled —that is, too polished—a style might even redound to the disadvantage of the writer of fiction, who is primarily a teller of stories and whose prose needs to remain supple enough to capture so many shades of mood and to insinuate itself into the thoughts of various and often vastly different characters. "But perhaps it is enough if the novelist contents himself with avoiding the grosser errors of grammar," Maugham wrote, "for no one can have considered this matter without being struck by the significant and

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surprising fact that the four greatest novelists the world has seen, Tolstoi, Balzac, Dostoyevsky and Dickens, wrote their respective languages very carelessly . . . ." Here one can add the name Dreiser, the prose in whose powerful novels on occasion didn't even achieve the level of carelessness.

Not that Maugham was ever close to being in the Dreiser class. (Dreiser himself, truth to tell, wasn't that often in the Dreiser class.) I have recently read what must amount to some four thousand pages of Maugham's prose and found myself seldom brought up by infelicities. In his earlier work he occasionally lapses into cliché; more than once he refers to the heart of one of his characters, in the heat of passion, going "pit-a-pat," when, for such a phrase, once is at least ten times too often. In *Of Human Bondage,* Sally Thorpe, the Dickensian sugar-puss heroine whom Philip Carey eventually marries, says to Carey, "You're an old silly, that's what you are," which causes one to blush, not for Carey but for Maugham. In the same book Mildred Rogers, the waitress who has enthralled Carey, is described as "weak as a rat," when rats are not generally thought weak at all but rather sinewy and tenacious. Finally, in *The Razor's Edge* Maugham, who believed that a writer of one nation has little chance of understanding the people of another nation, has his male American characters use the words "gosh" and "gee" more often than Oogie Pringle on the old "A Date with Judy" radio show. Still, for roughly four thousand pages, that isn't bad.

As a stylist what Maugham had was lucidity, fluency, and economy. In a sheer storyteller, which is what he was, these are the paramount qualities. Often his stories seem almost to tell themselves; such ostensible artlessness, of course, can only be conferred through the exercise of high art. Maugham wrote every morning from 9:45 to 12:45, and he wrote quickly and revised little. He received no editing from his publishers, Heinemann's in England and Doubleday in the United States, for he wanted none. As an author he was the equivalent to what in sports is known as a franchise player; with his huge sales, he could make a publishing house single-handedly, and publishers know not to fool with success of the kind such an author brings. In 1935, though, that curious figure Eddie Marsh, who had been a private secretary to Churchill, Asquith, and Joseph Chamberlain, offered to inspect Maugham's manuscripts for lapses in precision and errors in usage, which he did do for fourteen of Maugham's books until his, Marsh's, death in 1953 and for which Maugham felt great gratitude. Maugham learned a good deal from Marsh, as he seemed to learn from everyone and everything, and as he grew older his prose grew more confident and more precise.

As a writer of fiction, Maugham's ambitions were Balzacian. He believed an important writer needed to produce an ample body of work, and from that body deserved to be judged by the best of it. He claimed to have small powers of imagination, which caused him to fall back on industry to make up for it. "I have had one advantage," he wrote, "I have never wanted a subject. I have always had more stories in my head than I ever had time to write." He may not have had large powers of imagination but his powers of observation were of the first order. He plagiarized from life, frequently putting people he knew or had heard about in his stories and novels. (As a result of his writing many stories acquired in his travels in the Malay States, he was said to be considered very much non grata in the British clubs and outposts there.) "I have painted easel pictures," he wrote, "not frescoes." But when he was done he could fill many a gallery.

Why did Maugham write so much? Because, he might have answered, writing is what a writer is supposed to do, and besides, what else was he, who was rather easily bored, to do with his mornings? While at a certain point he no longer needed the money his pen brought in—a pen designed specifically for him, incidentally, with a thick collar that permitted a surer grasp—most assuredly he liked to see it come cascading

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in. He had, as the small businessmen used to put it, a high nut, with the expenses of maintaining the princely establishment that was Villa Mauresque, paying (always resentfully) alimony to his wife, and travelling in the grand style; doubtless, too, as someone whose young manhood was perforce lived frugally, he had no wish as a middle-aged and older man to dip into interest. But above all he appears to have written as much as he did because he loved to write, to go about with the characters from a story in his head, to work through the technical details of composition, to attempt to bring it all off as nearly perfect as possible. Whatever his motives, working day after day he produced an immense body of writing, although not all of it was of even quality and some of it was pretty poor stuff.

Enter the critics. "This novel, as unmitigated a specimen of fictional drivel as has appeared under respectable authorship within living memory, might be fitly dismissed as the latest triumph of servant-girl's literature were it not for the phenomenal value that still attaches to Maugham's name among modern authors." That explosive sentence is the opening line from a 1943 review by Morton Dauwen Zabel in *The Nation* of Maugham's novel *Up at the Villa.* In its anger this review does not drop off precipitously from this first line. It goes on to attack Maugham for being "hostile to artistic risk," for "his career in the fashionable drawing-rooms and international cocktail sets of Europe," and for his derogations of Henry James; and the review ends by noting that "if the title of 'greatest living English novelist' is to be thrown around any further, it is time it landed in the right quarter. The greatest living English novelist is E. M. Forster." *Up at the Villa,* true enough, is a very poor novel; Maugham himself told Glenway Wescott that he was ashamed of having written it. But the poorness of the novel doesn't quite explain the vehemence of Zabel's review. Whence the anger in that review? Why the personal attack?

Edmund Wilson was even rougher on Maugham, saying that he was "second-rate" and that "his swelling reputation in America"—the year was 1946—showed "a conspicuous sign of the general decline of our standards." The occasion for Wilson's attack was another poor Maugham performance, *Then and Now,* his novel about Machiavelli. The quality of this book, Wilson pronounced, "is never . . . that either of a literary artist or of a first-rate critic of morals; and it may be worthwhile to say this at a moment when there seems to be a tendency to step up Mr. Maugham's standing to the higher ranks of English fiction, and when Mr. Maugham himself has been using his position of prestige for a nagging disparagement of his betters." Who, one may ask, might these betters be? They turn out to be the great modernist writers—Joyce and James and Yeats and Proust—of whom Maugham had, in Wilson's view, a far from adequate appreciation. For example, in a talk at the Library of Congress, Maugham had said: "Proust, as we know, was enormously influenced by the now largely discredited philosophy of Henri Bergson and great stretches of his work turn upon it. I suppose we all read with a thrill of excitement Proust's volumes as they came out, but now when we reread them in a calmer mood I think what we find to admire in them is his wonderful humor and the extraordinarily vivid and interesting characters that he created in profusion." Wilson counters that this is, in effect, philistine—true, one doesn't encounter all that many Proust-reading philistines—and that Proust's use of Bergson is crucial to his novel's being "the greatest philosophical novel ever written." I think Maugham was more correct than Wilson, but what we have here is a serious conflict of intellectual temperaments—that between a writer and a reader, which Maugham was, and a pure critic, which Edmund Wilson was. In his publication of this piece in *Classics and Commercials,* Wilson stepped up the vehemence of his attack on Maugham in a postscript in which he called him "a half-trashy novelist, who writes badly, but is patronized by half-serious readers, who do not care much about writing."

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Maugham found admirers among men of letters and writers; among his supporters were Cyril Connolly, Virginia Woolf, Desmond MacCarthy, Evelyn Waugh and V. S. Pritchett; and Orwell wrote of him, "I believe the modern writer who has influenced me most is Somerset Maugham, whom I admire immensely for his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills." But among what he termed "highbrow critics" Maugham's name has never been an approved one. He knew this, and, though he pretended to be above it, one finds running throughout his work a sputtering volley of shots against "intellectuals," "highbrows," "the intelligentsia," and "critics of the intelligentsia." Maugham is partly to blame for incitement to critical riot against his own work.

Why did they detest Maugham so? Were they jealous of his success, the vast audience and riches his writing earned? Perhaps this entered into it, but more important, I suspect, was that his writing was an affront to them. He was apolitical and he wrote dead against the grain of modernism, with all its difficulty, preferring instead to write as plainly as possible about complex things. Say what one wishes against them, no one can accuse the modernist writers of not keeping critics gainfully employed. In an idle fantasy I sometimes think of these writers—Joyce and Eliot and Yeats and Kafka and the rest—mounted on motorcycles in a parade up the Champs-Élysées, a critic or two sitting in a small sidecar attached to each cycle, beaming with pleasure at being allowed along for the ride. But Maugham kept no sidecar; each of his books, to switch metaphors rather abruptly, might have carried a small message, à la the Surgeon General's warning on cigarette packages, "No explanation, explication, or exegesis required. Read on without prolegomenon."

But one doesn't have to attack the modernist writers because one admires Somerset Maugham; nor need one think oneself half-serious for admiring him. Maugham remains intensely, immensely readable. Why? One recalls his revealing the secrets of his craft to the Chinese professor: "One is to have common sense and the other is to stick to the point." The point Maugham stuck to throughout his long career was the investigation of that magnificent, comic, admirable, outrageous, depressing, impressive, grim, gracious, grudging, great, and elusive thing called human nature. Human nature was Maugham's enduring subject, and for fiction there is none greater. If you are interested in it, you have to be interested in the writing of Somerset Maugham. As for his common sense, it was pervasive; the test is that he was an artist who knew that there are things in life greater than art. "I think," he wrote in *A Writer's Notebook,* "there is in the heroic courage with which man confronts the irrationality of the world a beauty greater than the beauty of art." Because he was able to insinuate such sentiments, subtly, dramatically, into his work—see, for an example, the story entitled "Sanatorium"—Maugham shall always be a writer for readers who care for more than writing alone.

And yet it is difficult to convey a precise impression of the quality of Maugham's work through naming two or three of his best books. He was right about himself in thinking that he was a writer of the kind for whom the body of his work is greater than the parts taken individually. Of his novels, I find only one, *Cakes and Ale,* completely successful. It is, I think, his masterpiece, a rich comedy about the literary life, its exactions and its delights and its fraudulence. It contains a dazzling portrait of the type of the literary widow and an even better account of the young literary hustler in the character of Alroy Kear, modeled, as it turns out, on Hugh Walpole—a man, as Maugham later averred, "easy to like, but difficult to respect." The literary widow, the literary hustler, the utterly self-absorbed artist, these are types that do not disappear, and Maugham was the first to mount them, like so many butterflies, on a narrative of seamless velvet.

Of his own books, Maugham said he liked *Cakes and Ale* best but tended to agree with

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the common opinion that held *Of Human Bondage* to be his most important work. In this latter, largely autobiographical book Maugham worked on a larger canvas than he ever would again; it is the sort of novel where one can introduce, for the first time, a major character as late as page 421. I first read *Of Human Bondage* when I was twenty and now I have re-read it approaching fifty, and it still seems to me immensely interesting. I tend to think of it as the best nineteenth-century novel written well into the twentieth century. It was publicly promoted at its publication by Theodore Dreiser in a review in *The New Republic* that made its reputation in America. Good as much of the book is, it nonetheless seems badly flawed toward its close by Maugham's need to resolve the action, to put an end to his young hero's troubles in a way that is not only conclusive but happy, and happy in the rather sappiest Dickensian mode.

I shall not run through all of Maugham's books that I have read or re-read, but I do think *The Razor's Edge* is in some ways representative of both Maugham's gifts and deficiencies. This is the novel, it will be recalled, about the quest of a young American named Larry Darrell for the ultimate truths about the meaning of life. In the character Isabel Maturin, Maugham created an extraordinarily vivid and hence persuasive portrait of a grasping American rich girl who wants *merely* everything. In Elliott Templeton, the wealthy expatriate American snob, Maugham has created a character of whom it is not ridiculous to say that, after the Baron de Charlus, he may well be the most interesting snob in modern literature. "I don't in the least mind pigging it at the Ritz," he announces at one point. Elliott Templeton is one of those characters whom you don't wish ever to leave the page, in the way one wants certain charming character actors never to leave the stage. Almost everything about *The Razor's Edge* is brilliant—except, alas, Larry Darrell's quest. This may be because goodness, which young Darrell is tiresomely meant to represent, is usually less interesting than its reverse; it may be because ultimate truths about the meaning of life are never quite convincing; it may be because Somerset Maugham's powers of idealization had long since withered. But *The Razor's Edge* resembles nothing so much as a ring with a large rhinestone at the center and with smaller but perfect gems all round it.

One is unlikely to encounter Maugham's books in a university curriculum. In my youth his work, because he was an international bestseller, was ubiquitous, and if one was at all bookish one was likely, when young, to have read *The Razor's Edge* and *Of Human Bondage*; or if one thought of oneself as artistic to have found self-justification in reading *The Moon and Sixpence,* his not very good novel modeled on the life of Paul Gauguin. Today I think the best introduction—or re-introduction—to Maugham is through his short stories. So many of these seem so good that it may be unjust to single out a few. But among the four volumes of stories now available in Penguin editions, "Mr. Harrington's Washing" is a work of comic genius; "The Pool" may be the best story ever written on the subject of going native; "The Hairless Mexican" is spy fiction raised to the highest power; and "Lord Mount Drago" is but one of his many stories that provide a cunning anatomy of snobbery. Maugham's nonfiction also bears looking into. At the top of his form he was a very capable essayist—see the volumes entitled *The Vagrant Mood* and *Points of View* —and *Don Fernando,* the book on Spanish culture, contains many clever and wise things. My sense is that it is best to read Maugham's stories and nonfiction first, and let them lead one back to the novels, where one is likely to discover that Maugham is one of those novelists who can be profitably read when young but who get better as one gets older.

Maugham would probably be best served by a single volume on the order of the "Viking Portable" series, except that, in his case, the volume, to suit his ample talent, would have to be of a thickness beyond portability. Such a volume, if I were its editor, would

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include all of *Cakes and Ale,* the better part of *The Summing Up,* the portrait of Elliott Templeton from *The Razor's Edge,* the essays on El Greco, Burke's prose, and Kant's aesthetics, and nearly everything he wrote on prose style. What would make the volume bulge, proving a severe test of the binder's art, would be the number of short stories that would have to be included. The short story really was Maugham's best form, and he published more than a hundred of them —among serious writers, perhaps only Chekhov wrote more. Some of his stories are thin, especially those that attempt to point an easy moral or have a trick ending, but the vast majority are very sturdily made. Those set in the Malay States, taken together, conduce to give as complete a picture of the British abroad as do Kipling's stories of India. Maugham's stories about the artistic life—"The Alien Corn," "The Creative Impulse" chief among them—are also too good not to be included.

Often Maugham's stories seem akin to reading La Rochefoucauld with illustrations—not drawings of course but illustrations from life. Maugham resembles La Rochefoucauld in taking avarice, lust, fear, and snobbishness for his subjects. Yet unlike La Rochefoucauld, Maugham's dark views about human nature are often stood on their head by evidence of courage, honesty, and integrity, almost always of an unexpected and complicated kind. Maugham is that odd phenomenon: a moralist who is never surprised by immorality. As he puts it in "The Pool," "I held my breath, for to me there is nothing more awe-inspiring than when a man discovers to you the nakedness of his soul. Then you see that no one is so trivial or debased but that in him is a spark of something to excite compassion."

Although he lived long and in splendor, Maugham's life was far from a happy one. As he grew older he grew more suspicious of the people around him—some of whom, it is necessary to add, were fully worthy of his suspicions—and, true to character, never lapsed into the jolly old man of letters, full of false wisdom for the world. With age the lower part of his face set into a permanent scowl, his eyes acquired a squint, and various people would later describe him as looking like a lizard, a spotted toad, a Gila monster in a robe. The last six or so years of his ninety-one-year life were spent tuning in and out of senility; when tuned into senility he was capable of making the kind of devastating remark in company that could make the bubbles disappear from the champagne. S. N. Behrman, who in his memoir *People in a Diary* remarked that he had never "met anyone who had greater will-power, greater self-control than W. S. Maugham," recalls Maugham, toward the end, his stammer still not under control, saying to him, "If you think I'm g-g-ga-ga, you should see W-W-Winston." Like most people who live well beyond the normal span, his was neither a dignified nor an edifying end, which arrived at long last in a French hospital on December 15, 1965.

Yet for all the unhappiness of Somerset Maugham's outward life, there was still the inward life, which in his case meant the life of the writer, and this brought its own satisfactions. In a passage in *Cakes and Ale* he wrote about the single but powerful compensation of that life:

> I began to meditate upon the writer's life. It is full of tribulation. First he must endure poverty and the world's indifference; then, having achieved a measure of success, he must submit with a good grace to its hazards. He depends upon a fickle public. He is at the mercy of journalists who want to interview him, and photographers who want to take his picture, of editors who harry him for copy and tax-gatherers who harry him for income tax, of persons of quality who ask him to lunch and secretaries of institutes who ask him to lecture, of women who want to marry him and women who want to divorce him, of youths who want his autograph, actors who want parts and strangers who want a loan, of gushing ladies who want advice on their matrimonial affairs and earnest young men who want advice on their compositions, of agents, publishers, managers, bores, admirers, critics, and his

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own conscience. But he has one compensation. Whenever he has anything on his mind, whether it be a harassing reflection, grief at the death of a friend, unrequited love, wounded pride, anger at the treachery of someone to whom he has shown kindness, in short any emotion or any perplexing thought, he has only to put it down in black and white, using it as the theme of a story or the decoration of an essay, to forget all about it. He is the only free man.

There is little one can add to this, except to say that, through reading the work of a superior writer, which Somerset Maugham was, the rest of us become a little freer, too.

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Memory and responsibility: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*

by Ewa Kuryluk

Shoah, the Hebrew word for annihilation, is the title of Claude Lanzmann's documentary film on the Holocaust, and of his book[1] containing the complete text. The film caused a stir in Paris, where it was released this spring, and in the United States, where it was shown for the first time at the New York Film Festival in October.

Not a professional film director but a medical doctor, Lanzmann worked on *Shoah* for ten years and selected finally nine and a half hours from 350 hours of material. The film brings together the interviews Lanzmann himself conducted with Jewish survivors, their Nazi persecutors, and predominantly Polish onlookers, all of whom speak in front of his camera. It also includes an extremely skillful montage of images connected, in some way or other, to their testimony. The film contains no archival footage but shows the sites of extermination camps, railway stations, villages, cities, and landscapes mostly situated in Poland and recorded exactly the way they looked when Lanzmann visited them.

Upon reading about *Shoah,* one feels at first reluctant to see it. One fears that one will be confronted, as many times before, with an unsuccessful attempt to deal with a chapter of history that, at once stereotypical and unique, resists comprehension. The difficulty results from the gap between the banal truth that human beings are capable of anything—that they have been each others prey throughout history—and the sheer novelty of the form and scale of the "Final Solution." What defies imagination is the number of Jews "processed" in a short period of time and the industrial efficiency with which the Nazis killed men, women, and children, whose deaths they regarded as merely a phase of production: mattresses were manufactured from the hair of women, lampshades from human skin, soap was made from skeletons. Not only did the Nazis attempt annihilation on a scale reminiscent of the hate-filled vision of John's Revelation—i.e., the complete destruction of the "bad" part of humanity—but they also achieved the absolute degradation of human beings, treating them as if they were animals or objects. Of course, annihilation implies such degradation, as can be seen in the innumerable representations of the Last Judgment in Western art, where devils boil men and women as if they were chickens or pigs. But these traditional images lack an essential element of the Nazi destruction: the orderly and systematic quality of their "death factories."

Claude Lanzmann's great achievement stems from his recognition that in order to understand the Holocaust one has to ask small questions and study minute details. He extracts valuable information not only from the Jewish survivors but, miraculously, from the Nazis intent on their destruction. But

1 *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* by Claude Lanzmann, Pantheon, 228 pages, $11.95.

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the information in these private tales—and their juxtaposition with other people's reports—constitute only one aspect of the film. Equally important, and at times even more compelling, are other details: the facial expressions, the smiles and laughter, the tears and slips of tongue, the pauses, the rhythms of speech, the choice of certain words, the refusal to speak.

Jorge Luis Borges has said that the ability to forget allows us to go on living. *Shoah* at once confirms and disputes this. Indeed, no survivor is readily prepared to talk about a humiliation, degradation, and suffering that transcends ordinary notions of human fate, or to deal with the psychological burden of having escaped when others perished. On the other hand, one expects nothing but silence from those whose actions have been declared crimes against humanity. Perhaps only the Polish onlookers —the peasants from Treblinka or Birkenau, the railroad employees—have less than compelling reasons to be silent. But before Lanzmann no one had come to their backward part of Europe to find out what they had seen and how they had reacted.

How to make people remember, how to make them speak? In his interviews Lanzmann appealed to different motivations. The Jews had to be persuaded that they had survived in order to act as witnesses to their people's annihilation. The Nazis were reminded of the historical importance of their testimony: Lanzmann counted on the fact that, by reporting the horrors, they were given the chance to evoke the great days of their lives and to re-enter the human community, from which silence excluded them. But merely speaking isn't enough; the value of testimony depends on a good memory and the will to tell the truth. One feels an instinctive dislike for the Nazis who turned their backs on Lanzmann like, for instance, Joseph Oberhauser, an SS man from the extermination camp in Belzec. Shown at his workplace, a pub in Munich, Oberhauser initially refuses to answer even an innocent question: how much beer he pours into glasses every day. When Lanzmann inquires why he would not respond to it, Oberhauser replies: "I have my reasons." One finds no less repulsive those whose memory presents a blank, or those who still talk in the official jargon of the Third Reich, using code words designed to hide facts, not reveal them.

Memory, one soon realizes while watching this film, goes with assuming responsibility, and forgetting goes with avoiding it. Dr. Franz Grassler (a lawyer by training, and the deputy to the Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw ghetto, Dr. Auerswald), who was responsible for the cruelty of the SS and for starving the Jews to death, remembers neither the date of his arrival in Warsaw nor the year of the uprising. He cannot recall ever having heard about the Final Solution. When Lanzmann quotes to him from the diaries of Adam Czerniakow (the chief of the Warsaw Judenrat who recorded, among other things, his dealings with this very man), Grassler responds to the forgotten facts with surprise, interest, and a perfectly played naïveté. He even goes so far as to write them down, and concludes that the Jews obviously knew more about their forthcoming extermination than he did. By means of pretended ignorance or amnesia he frees himself from responsibility.

Listening to Grassler, one wonders about the particular qualities of memory. To what extent can it be manipulated? To which faculties or emotions is it connected—intelligence, sensibility, compassion? How should one explain the fact that one Nazi persecutor forgets everything while another remembers everything? Does the answer lie in physiology, psychology, or morality?

Franz Suchomel, an SS man from Treblinka, answers each of Lanzmann's questions with great precision. He quotes exact numbers, gives precise locations, furnishes additional details when they are needed, and differentiates. For instance, he does not simply refer to the mass of people at Treblinka as "Jews"; he refers to them as "men," "women," and "children," betraying a discrimination that persisted there until the very end. Upon arriving at Treblinka, the men were forced to the right and were

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gassed first. The women and children were forced to go to the left and wait outside, sometimes for hours, naked even in the winter. While they stood in line, specifies Suchomel, a deadly terror ("Todesangst") subjected them to additional humiliation and suffering: they threw up, menstruated, had diarrhea—reactions, Suchomel says, natural to all human beings under such conditions.

Suchomel delivers his report in a cultivated, clear, and matter-of-fact German that even the best translation cannot do justice to. Obviously intelligent and well read, he articulates his report "properly." For anyone who knows German this discrepancy between the "right" speech and the "wrong" person is terribly disturbing. Unlike the other Nazis interviewed by Lanzmann, Suchomel speaks neither the elevated "Beamtendeutsch" (bureaucratic German) of the Third Reich nor the language of a petty bourgeois egoist. He speaks a good German, and this inevitably arouses one's sympathy for him. But can such a feeling be justified? Surely even an absolutely corrupt person can speak in the right way. But as one arrives at this conclusion another thought crosses the mind: maybe Suchomel has changed since Treblinka and his language mirrors that transformation? Since this possibility can neither be excluded nor assumed, one finds oneself richer in experience but poorer in certainty. Like great works of art, *Shoah* points to the ambiguity at the heart of human experience.

A knowledge of Polish is equally important for understanding the film. No doubt a translator more skillful than the woman Lanzmann used could have rendered better the primitive language of the peasants. But one wonders whether the nuances could ever be adequately conveyed. Besides, the Polish translator's visible difficulty in finding French equivalents for such words as "Żydki"—a pejorative, diminutive form of "Żydzi" meaning "little Jews"—presents in itself an interesting problem. It seems to illuminate her inability to confront the Jewish issue in a matter-of-fact way. The woman, a representative of the postwar urban intelligentsia in Poland, obviously suffers from being obliged to translate vulgar and anti-Semitic phrases that contradict the official version of the period, this version being that Poles and Jews suffered equally from Nazi atrocities and that many Poles tried to save the Jews.[2]

Either such propaganda has not reached the simple people or they have ignored it. Unlike intellectuals, they are unable to choose their words carefully and cleverly. Thus, their stories create an embarrassing contrast to the official Polish version. They admit having seen Jews being taken out of their houses, imprisoned in ghettoes, deported, and killed. They report that trains, filled to the roof with Jews, arrived in their villages and left empty a few hours later. They mention the terrible stench of burning bodies, which they smelled while they were working in the fields. Pressed by Lanzmann, they confess that although they disagreed with the methods of the Nazis they rarely showed signs of compassion and sympathy for the Jewish people. Some speak of their fear for their own lives and stress that to help the Jews—by giving them water when they were dying of thirst during the transports, for example—would have meant taking great risks. Others admit their prejudices against the Jews or their open dislike of

2 The official version also makes no distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps—between Auschwitz, where resistance fighters and anti-Nazis from many countries were kept, and Birkenau, where only Jews were gassed. When, in 1967, the editors of the *Great Polish Encyclopaedia* alluded to this distinction by including two entries—"concentration camps" and "extermination camps"—the Communist Party was enraged and the ensuing scandal provoked a wave of anti-Semitism. The publishers were accused of "diminishing the suffering of the Polish people" and of "spreading Zionism." A vulgar campaign against the publishing house led to its dismantling and the dismissal of the majority of its Jewish employees, many of whom later emigrated to the West. A few years later the encyclopaedia's "gross error" was "corrected" in a new edition.

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them. Those who today inhabit former Jewish property do not show much moral distress when interviewed by Lanzmann in front of their nicely ornamented wooden houses which once belonged to Jews; while some appear to be slightly embarrassed, others seem perfectly satisfied with their acquisition.

Unlike Suchomel, the Polish peasants are inarticulate; their very language discredits them, and so do their gestures, grimaces, outbreaks of laughter. But are they to be judged more harshly because of that? This is a dangerous moment for the viewer of *Shoah,* as well as for Lanzmann, who fights his resentment with visible difficulty. At this point in the film one regrets that he did not interview, for the sake of justice, the French burghers who took over Jewish apartments or the Christian Greeks who did not protest the deportations of their neighbors and who gladly appropriated Jewish possessions. Of course, not everything can be shown in a film already three times as long as the usual documentary, but the proper proportions should be maintained. The situation in Poland was not unique. It is true that in Greece and France the final destination of the Jews was unknown while in Treblinka and Birkenau the burning ovens could actually be smelled. But does this necessarily speak against the Polish population? Yes, in the sense that Poles cannot claim ignorance. No, in the sense that it takes less effort and courage to prevent a deportation happening in the middle of ordinary life than to act heroically in the face of a machinery of destruction so advanced that it causes sheer terror. When we know that out of the fourteen thousand French policemen who were sent to arrest the Jews of Paris only two disobeyed and resigned their jobs, it seems inappropriate to dwell almost exclusively on the attitudes of the Polish population.

But Lanzmann's problems with proportion in no way justify the campaign that was mounted against the French director by the Polish authorities. Angry with themselves for having granted him the permission to work in Poland, they accused him of perfidy and falsity, of blaming the Poles and exonerating the Germans. Although Lanzmann can be criticized for focusing too exclusively on the anti-Semitism of the Polish peasants, one has to stress that, on the other side, he points out their complete powerlessness. Hardly anybody before him has shown with such clarity the enormous cultural gap dividing the most backward parts of Poland from Germany's highly developed civilization. It was no coincidence that the extermination sites were erected near the Bug, the frontier river that runs between Poland and the Soviet Union, in the vast Eastern forests, in a serene countryside unspoiled by industry, amidst peasants who even today plough their fields with horses—all of which Lanzmann shows when he visits this countryside with his camera. Indeed, the place was well chosen: "worse than primitive," as a German woman puts it in the film, and with a conveniently harsh continental climate. There the death factories must have looked like the machinery of bad dreams. In silent woods the Nazis experimented with new methods of killing—quick, bloodless, efficient, cheap. They loaded trucks with Jews, turned the exhaust gases inward, drove slowly out of town to the nearest forest, unloaded the corpses and half-dead, and buried them on the spot. Undisturbed, they improved their gas chambers, speeding up the process and minimizing the cost. Against the backdrop of a proverbially inefficient Polish economy, the traditional German virtues of order, discipline, and productivity reached unprecedented dimensions.

As presented in Lanzmann's film, the anti-Semitism of the Polish peasants appears to have been largely irrelevant to the success of the Final Solution. It was, after all, not the persecution of the Jews but the quasi-industrial form of their destruction that was the novelty of the Holocaust, as the American historian Raul Hilberg points out in the film. While it would have made all the moral difference had more Poles helped the Jews, the film shows that the chances of stopping the death machine from within Poland were

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nonexistent. Thus, Lanzmann dispels the Polish myth of a humanitarian population and at the same time opposes the legend, particularly popular among some American Jews, that the Holocust would not have happened had the Poles been less anti-Semitic.

Quite properly, Lanzmann does not omit the accusations brought against the Poles by the survivors of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. In *Shoah,* survivors of the ghetto tell of people who delivered Jews to the Germans for money and confirm a fact still disputed in Poland—that the Polish underground refused to furnish Jewish fighters with arms. These testimonies are counterbalanced by an interview with Jan Karski, the former courier between the Polish underground and the exile government in London. A man of extreme courage, honesty, and nobility, Karski breaks down in tears when speaking about the Warsaw ghetto. Karski's description of life there illuminates not only the terrible conditions under which the Jews were forced to live but also their psychological burdens. Taken to the ghetto through a secret entrance, Karski realizes with horror that his companion, a well-known Jewish leader who on the Polish side of the wall had impressed him by his almost aristocratic manners, loses his quiet dignity and undergoes a physical change as soon as they pass into the ghetto. Like the other inhabitants there, he becomes a sick, half-dead man, reinforcing Karski's own impression that he had left humanity and arrived in Hell. Hardly able to bear what he is shown, Karski has to be led out quickly. A strong sense of duty makes him visit the ghetto a second time. He will remain shattered by this experience for the rest of his life.

The Jewish leaders in Poland asked Karski to describe his experience to politicians and public figures in the West in order to make the Allies act on behalf of the Jews. They hoped that if adequate information about the Final Solution could reach the German people, they would rebel against the Nazi regime, they thought also that train trucks and extermination sites should be bombed. Karski fulfilled his mission and delivered their messages in October 1942 to Anthony Eden, Lord Cranborne and Arthur Koestler. In January 1943 he was received by Roosevelt who, however, did not let him speak, saying that he was already informed about everything. Felix Frankfurter, the president of the Supreme Court, on the other hand, told the courier that he simply could not believe his words were true. Assuming, perhaps, that all this was already known, Lanzmann cut Karski's testimony at the words "I fulfilled my mission" and mentioned the details of it only in interviews he gave after the release of *Shoah.* But the inactivity of the Allies represents such an important issue that one strongly regrets this omission.

Listening to Karski, one becomes aware of the enormous distance that separates his speech from that of Suchomel, although both men remember vividly and speak well. Compared to the testimonies of the other Nazis, Suchomel's language strikes one by its capacity to differentiate, but when measured against Karski's description, it clearly lacks another property: the capacity to individualize. Suchomel sorts out men, women, and children, but he never mentions, as does Karski, a single human being, a particular old man, woman, or child. Of course, compared with Treblinka, the Warsaw ghetto was almost a normal place, but this does not explain everything. The individualizing character of Karski's speech is due to his compassion; it reflects a sensibility that Suchomel does not possess.

The sensibility of the surviving victims of the Holocaust, on the other hand, is often frozen by unbearable suffering and can only be revived by the recounting of private, intimate remembrances. Lanzmann demonstrates this—in a particularly moving way—in his conversation with the barber Abraham Bomba, whom the Nazis forced to cut the hair of women at Treblinka before they were gassed. Interviewed at a barber shop in Israel, Bomba narrates his experience with an expressionless face, in a monotonous voice and colorless English. When Lanz-

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mann presses him for details he nearly stops talking. Excusing himself for his insistence, Lanzmann implores Bomba to describe the exact procedure. Finally Bomba speaks of the room in which naked women sat on wooden benches while professional barbers, all Jewish men, gave them haircuts that were supposed to look as if they had been done for hygenic purposes. Bomba's stiff language underplays the macabre character of this setting, but with every detail a visible tension builds within him, and then a rupture comes. Remembering a particular transport of women from his native town of Czestochowa, which included women he and the other barbers knew, he breaks down in tears.

In a centuries-old tradition, we have become used to images of women crying over the dead bodies of men; in recording the tears of Abraham Bomba the film displays the iconography of a world in which young men were spared, not women. In order for the Nazis to hide their crimes and operate as cheaply as possible, they employed a minimum of their own people in the extermination camps: thus, young male prisoners were professionally useful. The dirtiest jobs were performed by Jewish men ("Arbeitsjuden"), whom the Nazis later murdered. Many of these men could not endure the work in the death factories and committed suicide; the few who survived buried their experience behind a wall of silence.

One survivor, Simon Srebrnik, was thirteen years old at the time of the Holocaust. The German soldiers liked his high and clear voice. Going around in chains, like the other Jews, he sang Polish and German folk songs and military songs. Even today the Polish peasants of Chelmno remember the singing boy. Srebrnik, now a grey-haired man with a soft, calm face, agreed to return to the place of his persecution for the purposes of the film. *Shoah* starts with an image of him going by boat along the peaceful Ner River and singing old songs. On a Sunday morning he meets the villagers in front of their church. He smiles friendlily and the people who once knew him profess to be glad to see him again. What the camera records at that moment could be a perfect propaganda shot for those who claim that a warm, humane relationship existed between the population and the Jews. But then Lanzmann asks the Poles for their explanation of the Holocaust. At first no one answers. Then an old man steps forward and suggests that the Jews were punished for having crucified Jesus Christ. Interestingly, he does not tell this story—which the others immediately acclaim—as his own, but in the disguised form of a narrated speech. He maintains that he heard it from one of the Jews' own Rabbis. The tale and its form point to a double transference. In order to excuse his inactivity, the man declares the Jews guilty. To free himself of the suspicion of accusing them he makes the Jews accuse themselves. This transference calls to mind the guilt of the Catholic Church, which for centuries encouraged anti-Semitic excesses, and it suggests other transferences, of other individuals and nations guilty, to varying degrees, of not having saved the Jews from deportation and extermination.

Theodor Adorno once said that after the Holocaust no more poems could be written, implying that after this darkest moment in humanity's history everything had changed and the old forms of expression had to be abandoned. This brilliantly superficial statement was soon to be contradicted by experience. Not only were poems written again, but some of them were even inspired by the experience of the Holocaust—for example, Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" or Czeslaw Milosz's "Campo di Fiori," a poem comparing the people who amused themselves on a Sunday afternoon in Warsaw—undisturbed by the wind bringing over the ashes from the burning ghetto—to the Romans who continued to sell fruit and vegetables while Giordano Bruno was burned in the marketplace.

Adorno's words implied, however, not only the exhaustion of the lyrical form but the annihilation of language before the ultimate horror of the Holocaust. This idea

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is sometimes invoked to explain why people talk about the Holocaust in statistical terms and present it by means of photographic documentation—the terrible images from the extermination camps which since the war have been reproduced again and again. On the other hand, the Holocaust has become the theme of numberless books and films whose authors have trivialized and sentimentalized the Final Solution by relying on their own feelings and moral judgments rather than on precise facts.

The importance of *Shoah* comes from Lanzmann's recognition that the Holocaust can be—has to be—talked about like anything else, and that it can be remembered almost in a Proustian way, with specific details serving as the key to a store of memories. Indeed, one is affected most deeply during the film by the answers to the simplest questions. Was the weather on the day of your deportation as splendid as today? Lanzmann asks the Jews of Cyprus. Yes, it was. The sun did not turn black, the sea and sky shone with a heavenly blue. What was the temperature when the Jews waited naked in front of the gas chambers? he inquires of Suchomel. Freezing, Suchomel answers. Even the SS men had to be given warmer clothes. Did you pull up the train as far as the entrance to the extermination camp? Lanzmann asks a Polish engine driver. No, he responds. The cars were in front of me; I pushed them.

Presented as a concrete past, the Holocaust is regained in *Shoah,* through the remembrances of the survivors and through images of the landscape in which it all took place. Lanzmann's film stands out not only as a unique document for future generations but as a work of art concerned with memory, language, and responsibility.

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Remembering "Parsifal"

by Samuel Lipman

Though all the works of Richard Wagner present grave problems to the thinking opera lover, the difficulties presented by *Parsifal,* the last work of the *Meister* (as he was called in England at the end of the nineteenth century), probably dwarf those presented by the other nine operas of the composer's maturity. Before *Parsifal,* Wagner had not gone beyond the relatively conventional questions of doomed love, universal treachery, and (in *Die Meistersinger*) what is, at least superficially, a mere story of boy meets girl. Now, at the end of his career, he went on to what appeared very much like the founding of a new world-religion, a faith based on the operatic celebration of a Christ-like figure, who, through the wisdom produced by a hard-won chastity, becomes the savior of mankind.

Wagner adapted the story of *Parsifal* from the medieval legends of the search for the Holy Grail, a mystical object variously understood as a kind of talismanic stone or as the sacred chalice used at the Last Supper, in which Joseph of Arimathea caught the blood of Christ at the Crucifixion. Wagner based much of the plot on the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach, a German poet working in the first part of the thirteenth century. Many people, before and after Wolfram, had a hand in making the story of the young knight who, among other adventures, happens upon Monsalvat,[1] the castle of the order of the Knights of the Grail. Here the leader, wounded with his own lance in an encounter with an enchantress, is unable to fulfill his divine mission of service to the Grail. Although the young knight witnesses the impressive ceremony of the Grail and the agonized suffering of its chief acolyte, he is unable to understand the meaning of it all; had he so understood he would have healed the leader of his wound and himself succeeded to leadership of the order. For this default, he embarks on a life of wandering, again undergoing many adventures. Eventually he finds his way back to the castle, finally understanding that it is he who will become the savior of the Grail and of those who serve it.

The opera of *Parsifal* includes four chief characters (all to be found in some form in the original Grail romances) in addition to the eponymous hero. Gurnemanz is an aged knight who serves in Act I as Parsifal's guide to the wonders of the Grail and the suffering Amfortas, its leader. Klingsor is the evil sorcerer in Act II who sets the enthralled Kundry on the innocent Parsifal; it is her kiss which provides the epiphany by which Parsifal finally understands the nature of his task. In the final Act III, Gurnemanz and Kundry become mere bystanders as Parsifal recognizes his maturity, once again witnesses the Grail ceremony, and this time heals Amfortas's wound and assumes his divine role of protector of the Grail.

1 From this point on I am using Wagner's spelling of proper names.

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For Wagner, composing an opera was only a part of the task of creation. It was also necessary for him to explain himself to the public whose eventual existence he envisioned long before a particular work reached completion. *Parsifal* was no exception. As he usually did, Wagner prepared the way by an act of literary creation: in *Heldenthum und Christenthum* ("Hero-dom and Christendom," 1881), he detailed the world-metaphysical track on which the train of his thought had been hurtling. In the case of *Parsifal* that track was racial purity, an issue made urgent for Wagner by what he saw as the defiling of the Aryan race through miscegenation with various lower orders, among them the Jews. Only a year before, in *Religion und Kunst* ("Religion and Art"), Wagner had written that "it is more than doubtful that Jesus himself was of Jewish extraction"; at the same time he attempted to merge music with Christianity by the simple dictum that "Music reveals the inmost essence of the Christian religion with definition unapproached." Thus Wagner's stage was set for an opera explaining, through the use of Christian imagery, just how an Aryan savior might yet restore man's lost purity.

The course of Wagner's religious *démarche* was hardly easy. To those sticks-in-the-mud who protested that Christianity already existed and was in possession of its quite sufficient savior were now added new critics who argued against the new religion from the opposite standpoint: not from faith, but from its irrevocable loss. One such enemy of Wagner's true gospel was the philosopher Nietzsche, a somewhat less-than-balanced viewer of the spiritual condition of others; for Nietzsche, the world seemed all too small to contain both Wagner and himself. Others, with rather less stake in the spiritual leadership of mankind, nonetheless found Wagner's arrogance intolerable, and reacted by calling *Parsifal* the last, most decadent product of a pathologically depraved artist.

It must not be thought that the philosophical conception of *Parsifal* lacked for admirers at its birth, or that it has lacked since. Some of Wagner's most enthusiastic and energetic young supporters in Germany banded themselves together into a mock-religious order called, fittingly, "the Knights of the Grail"; Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Wagner's super-Wagnerite English admirer, was quick to believe that, as his biographer Geoffrey Field put it, his own "'positive Christianity' led predictably back to Bayreuth—where the Aryan Christian mysteries were celebrated in their pristine form, fusing race, culture, and religion into a powerful redemptive force."

A major complicating factor in the way *Parsifal* was seen in the first twenty or so years of its existence was the Wagner family's insistence on preserving what the composer called his *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (stage-consecrating festival drama) for performance solely at Bayreuth, thus protecting the work from defilement in heathen and corrupt opera houses and at the same time ensuring the financial future of the family after his death.

But interest in *Parsifal* was immense both in Europe and across the Atlantic, and in 1903 the Metropolitan Opera finally brought a waiting world the first performance of the opera outside Bayreuth. With this reduction of the sacred to the merely operatic, some of *Parsifal*'s magic began to wear off, and by the 1930s it was mostly just another opera in the Wagnerian canon. Fortunately for its reputation in more recent years, the work did not find much favor in wartime Germany.

The upshot of all this extra-musical history is that today there are few Wagnerians —no matter how devout their faith in the composer and his art—who would put forth messianic claims for whatever theological doctrines may be embedded in *Parsifal*. The modern world is profoundly opposed to the claims of religion, wherever they may be found and no matter how they may be expressed. Even more important, the case of *Parsifal* as idea was decided—despite the opera's relatively unimportant place in Germany under the Nazis—by the enormities committed in the name of Aryan racial purity by Adolf Hitler and the legions of his supporters.

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Indeed, there is no shortage of well-equipped authorities who find in *Parsifal* particular responsibility for the crimes of Nazism some fifty years after Wagner's death. Chief among them—at least in English—is the noted American Wagner scholar Robert Gutman, whose classic study, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (1968), remains the most damning indictment of the composer written by someone who is willing to grant him all credit for his towering musical achievement.

For Mr. Gutman, *Parsifal* is about "eroticism, vegetarianism, racism, and redemption." The eroticism had its origins in Wagner's affair, during the first Bayreuth Festival of 1876, with Judith Gautier, the beautiful young (and married) daughter of the French poet Théophile Gautier. The eroticism was not merely sexual, but extended to the composer's heightened interest in voluptuous fabrics and perfumes procured for him by his new *inamorata.* Somewhat remarkably, Wagner's interest in luxurious surroundings and certain refined physical delights of the senses did not extend to a simple craving for the dietary fleshpots. Instead, he was an evangelizing vegetarian—Mr. Gutman does not fail to point out that the monstrous Hitler also was a vegetarian—and this ideology carried with it not just the belief that the human body was defiled by eating animal flesh but also participation in the crusade against vivisection. In the Last Supper's meal of bread and wine, portrayed in both Acts I and III of *Parsifal,* Mr. Gutman sees an attempt to enlist Christ in the composer's ideological cause. Mr. Gutman also points out that Wagner's pronouncements about food seem mostly to have been a matter of recommendation to others rather than any sure guide to his own diet.

Mr. Gutman finds racism the inescapable precondition for Wagner's conception of redemption. For Mr. Gutman, the words Wagner wrote in his desire to explain *Parsifal* provide the key to understanding the meaning of the opera. The verdict on this meaning is harsh and damning:

> Surveying the world from the heights of Monsalvat, the Grail community in *Parsifal* was alarmed to observe natural selection working against its distinctive Aryanism. At its expense, others were growing more adroit, and the gods' very own appeared headed toward erasure. Something was terribly wrong; the evolutionary machinery was malfunctioning, confusing the fit with the unfit. Instead of working toward endless improvement and Aryan perfection, it was producing racial corruption. The knights were confronted with an enemy gaining upon them every day. Here was the decisive racial crisis that grew into an uncompromising struggle for Power. *Parsifal*'s false façade of Christian abnegation masks this almost insane conflict.
>
> . . . Redemption was promised the hard-pressed knights, but, obviously, the Wagnerian redeemer was not to be found among Jewish craftsmen or lepers. Not by accident did Gurnemanz almost immediately remark upon Parsifal's noble, highborn appearance. He knew what signs to read. Racial heredity and strict breeding, not natural selection, formed the new mechanism of salvation. Wagnerian eugenics had come into being; in his latest writing the composer had embraced the darker implications of Darwinism.

As powerful as all this is as intellectual history, and as correct as Mr. Gutman's analysis is in presenting Wagner's consciously articulated motives, such attempts fall far short—at least they do for me—of describing the nature of the work's effect on those who witness it, and in presenting the reasons for that effect. I very much doubt that my own reaction to *Parsifal* when I, as a boy of sixteen, first saw it had anything to do with vegetarianism, redemption through racism, or even the eroticism of the seduction scene of Act II. It is even more difficult for me to think that my reaction was in any way prompted by the work's anti-Semitic subtext. What, then, accounts for the overwhelming impact *Parsifal* made on me when I first saw it on the stage?

I have elsewhere described my general situation at the time when I saw my first

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Parsifal.[2] As a mid-adolescent I was uneasily perched between a tinseled past as a piano prodigy and a dubious future, I knew not where, in the real world. My loyalties as a musician were still with the great keyboard music upon which my piano studies had been focused. My knowledge of symphonic and operatic music was just about nil; my knowledge of the intellectual world, to say the least, was fragmented and rudimentary at best.

Up to this point—the 1950 San Franciso Opera season—I had never seen an opera. Now, suddenly, within the short space of a month, I found myself introduced to this particular art on what seems today like the highest level imaginable. At a Sunday matinee in the beginning of October I saw Verdi's *Aida*; two weeks later I saw Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*; a bare two weeks after that, I saw *Parsifal.*

Doubtless these performances constituted a magnificent introduction to opera. The *Aida* featured no less than Renata Tebaldi, then at the height of her career, and the brilliant and powerful tenor Mario Del Monaco as Radames. The *Tristan* was a rare postwar opportunity for Americans to see the immortal dramatic soprano Kirsten Flagstad as Isolde, and the *Parsifal* provided the same chance to witness Flagstad's portrayal of Kundry.

Undeniably great as all these performances were, I do not think it was a case of the stars on stage determining for me the fate of the works that they were presenting. Indeed, Tebaldi and Del Monaco, for all their beautiful singing, were unable to make me a Verdian; the many remarkable performances I have seen of this Italian master's work since have also failed to rid me of a certain coolness toward what is, after all, hardly a cool art. Not surprisingly, given the appeal of torrid love stories to adolescents, I was a pushover for the chromatic sensualities of *Tristan.* But it was the notes of the music itself, not the singing or the stage action, which stayed in my mind. Significantly, the beautiful orchestral melody from the middle of the Love Duet in Act II, named in an old Kobbé's *Complete Opera Book* the "Motive of Love's Peace," scarcely left my thoughts for several days after the performance.

I found matters somewhat different in *Parsifal.* Flagstad's Kundry was indeed marvelous. I can still remember her extraordinarily secure and plangent vocalism as in Act II she recounted the suffering and death of Parsifal's mother, Herzeleide. But it was not even this great singing which formed my opinion of the opera, nor the spectacle of Act II, with its star roles for Kundry and Parsifal and its bevy of undulating Flower Maidens doing their best to entrap the hero with their sexual allure. Instead it was Act III, largely static in stage movement and with no real sung role for Kundry at all, which was to have an almost indescribably great effect on me.

Some of this effect certainly was due to the quality of Wagner's Act III music *qua* music. Though the act runs for approximately eighty minutes, the manifold beauties of the melodic design, the gentle and full orchestral texture, the always compelling rhythmic pulse, and the extraordinary combination of recognizable motivic material and constant variation; all these produced to my ears a symphonic work with not one note too many—or too few. To this day I find Act III to possess a kind of musical perfection on the largest possible scale unequalled anywhere.

But this *musical* power had less to do with the work's effect on me when I was sixteen than it has today, when at least I might hope that my musical sensibilities have advanced beyond the rather sentimental and crude responses of adolescence. I am afraid that there is no getting around the fact that my strong early response to *Parsifal,* though heightened by the work's musical marvels, was occasioned by the dramatic action of the act and the beguiling fantasy which that action clothes.

Perhaps a description of what goes on in Act III will serve to clarify matters. After a

2 "Growing Up with Old Records," in *The New Criterion,* April, 1984.

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poignant and tortured-sounding orchestral prelude, Act III divides into three parts. First, the returning Parsifal learns the nature of his divine task from Gurnemanz and discovers, in the presence of Gurnemanz and a repentant and largely silent Kundry, that on Good Friday even the flowers and the meadow are watered by the tears of the sinner. Then the great Act I transformation scene is repeated, changing the scene onstage from the meadow to the Hall of the Knights of the Grail. Once again the Knights enact the ceremony of the Grail and the Communion which is at its center; once again Amfortas, racked with pain, is unable to fulfill his role as leader. This time Parsifal does not stand dumbly by, but at the moment of the stricken leader's highest agony, strides forward, heals Amfortas's wound with the victim's own lance (which Klingsor had taken from Amfortas and then used to attack Parsifal at the end of Act II), and assumes the role as leader of the Knights of the Grail, and, at least by implication, as savior of mankind.

The words with which Parsifal announces this miracle of transfiguration, and the way in which it is received by the bystanders, leave little doubt about the assumption of quasi-divinity which has taken place:

> Nur eine Waffe taught: —
> die Wunde schliesst
> der Speer nur, der sie schlug.
> Sei heil, entsündigt und gesühnt!
> Denn ich verwalte nun dein Amt.
> Gesegnet sei dein Leiden,
> das Mitleids höchste Kraft,
> und reinsten Wissens Macht
> dem zagen Toren gab!
> Den heil'gen Speer —
> ich bring' ihn euch zurük!
> O! Welchen Wunders höchstes Glück! —
> Der deine Wunde durfte schliessen,
> ihm seh' ich heil'ges Blut entfliessen
> in Sehnsucht nach dem verwandten Quelle,
> der dort fliesst in des Grales Welle.
> Nicht soll der mehr verschlossen sein:
> Enthüllet den Gral, öffnet den Schrein!
>
> (Only one weapon is of use:—/the wound is closed/by the spear alone that produced it./Be healed, absolved, and atoned!/For I shall now fulfull your task./Blessed be your suffering/which gave pity's mightiest strength/and purest wisdom's power/to the timid fool!/The holy spear—/I bring it back to you!/Oh! This miracle's utmost joy!/From it, that was permitted to close your wound/I see flowing blessed blood/in its yearning for the kindred fountain/that flows there in the Grail's waves./No more shall it be hidden:/Reveal the Grail, unseal the shrine!)

And then the onlooking Boys, Youths, and Knights sing in various choral combinations the words:

> Höchsten Heiles Wunder!
> Erlösung dem Erlöser!
>
> (Highest holy wonder!/Redeemed our Redeemer!)

But the last words are not with the singers; they are in the stage directions, which set the seal on the entire passion:

> The ray of light falls from above, and the Grail glows brightest. From the dome a white dove descends and hovers over Parsifal's head. Kundry, with her gaze uplifted to Parsifal, sinks slowly lifeless to the ground. Amfortas and Gurnemanz kneel in homage before Parsifal, who waves the Grail in blessing over the worshipping knighthood.

It hardly requires much imagination to understand how immense a sacrilege this conclusion of what is after all still only an opera must have represented—and must still represent, to some extent—to believing Christians; the usurpation of a divine Christ by a human Parsifal, and by inference by Richard Wagner as *animateur,* is surely intolerable. But it is also easy to see what all this must have represented to me as I watched it with the wondering eyes of a sixteen-year-old. I found little of Christianity in what I saw on the stage, for, coming as I did

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from a proudly self-conscious Jewish family, I could hardly interpret new experiences in a Christian framework. Similarly, given my background, I could hardly respond favorably to Wagner's projection of a hostile, anti-Semitic racial purity. Instead, I saw here the very turning into reality of every boy's fantasy: the surmounting of the psychical tribulations of adolescence, the final inheritance of the world, and the benign ruling of mankind through the possession of that inheritance.

So obvious does this reading of *Parsifal* now appear to me that the merest recapitulation of the plot serves to make the point. A pure, simple boy—Wagner called him *der reine Tor* (the innocent fool)—finds himself faced with a world in trouble. After initially failing to understand and cure the trouble, he reaches wisdom through withstanding physical temptation and replacing that temptation with a sympathetic understanding of the condition of man. The consequence of this wisdom is the fulfillment of the prophetic vision of the Grail, which Gurnemanz describes in Act I:

> Durch Mitleid wissend,
> der reine Tor;
> harre sein,
> den ich erkor.
>
> (Through compassion enlightened/the innocent fool;/wait for him/my chosen one.)

It is difficult to talk of childish things—even vital and necessary things—without seeming childish. And yet one would hardly wish to deny both the power and the value of such grandiloquent dreams in the process of maturation. In my own case, identification with Parsifal as a world-conquering hero was only a small step beyond my earlier dream, as a child prodigy, of revivifying the world through my piano-playing.[3] What was extraordinary about all this, I must repeat, was not that *I* had these absurd albeit touching thoughts; what was remarkable was that a great art work—in this case *Parsifal*—brought the force of the greatest possible music to bear upon the representation of a widely applicable developmental fantasy.

And so perhaps I must admit that when today I think of *Parsifal* I do so with something more than musical admiration for Wagner's art; I also recapture in Act III (perhaps in the way great art and literature makes specially possible) a precious moment of my growing up. To say this is not to deny whatever real poison there is in *Parsifal,* or to minimize the value of intellectual analysis of a work of art,[4] and least of it all is it to reduce this complex opera to the level of a children's tale. It is simply to state the obvious truth that art exists on two levels: its own—and ours.

I have now seen *Parsifal* quite a few times in the opera house—always at the Metropolitan—since I was first overpowered by the work back in 1950. I remember a very poor performance in 1960, ruined by routine conducting, poor singing, and ill-rehearsed stage business. More recent performances at the Met, under the baton of James Levine, have been great improvements in all respects. But even in these much better performances, I have found little magic to bring me into the dramatic action. Instead, I have regularly been forced to retreat into sour and perhaps even churlish reflections on what a poor thing greasepaint is when confronted with the perfervid creations which result from the encounter of our own imaginations with art.

But greasepaint is one thing, and sound recordings are another. It has often been commented upon that old-time radio had the power to involve its listeners in a way

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3 For a description of my checkered life as a child pianist and embryonic virtuoso, see "Confessions of a Prodigy," in *Commentary,* May, 1981; this article is also contained in James R. Gaines (ed.), *The Lives of the Piano* (1981).

4 For just such an attempt at an intellectual analysis of the contents of a Wagner opera, in this case *Die Meistersinger,* see my article "Wagner Comes to Broadway," in *Commentary,* January, 1976. This article was also reprinted in my *Music After Modernism* (1979).

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that television does not, despite its technological sophistication. Staged opera performances today, given their seemingly pervasive slickness and the alienation so widely felt from older operatic conventions, frequently seem a kind of live television. Opera recordings, on the other hand, for all their electronic incompleteness, provide a kind of blessed room for the listener's imagination to move in, a room unfilled by the latest prancings of a stage director's ego.

In any case, I still find my affection for *Parsifal* undimmed when I listen to the work on records. Alas, it is only on records that it is possible today to find the kind of architectural pacing necessary to communicate in musical terms what I see as the inevitability of the dramatic outcome. The problem then becomes, of course, *which* records? By now the choice among available representations is wide. As always, acoustic records—those made before the advent of electrical recording in 1925—can just about be ruled out on grounds of their dimness and sonic artificiality.

The *Parsifal* recordings which count can be grouped into three kinds: 78 RPM electrical discs, often of extended excerpts, made as early as 1926 and as late as the outbreak of World War II, and in recent years in large part available in excellent LP transfers; seven complete commercial recordings, the first made in 1951 and the last as recently as 1984; and so-called pirate recordings, taken (with at least one important exception) from radio broadcasts of performances at the Bayreuth Festival during the 1950s and 1960s.

The 78 RPM discs, not surprisingly, feature legendary conductors and soloists, and represent performance standards of the highest historical interest and greatest intrinsic musical value. Perhaps the most important of these still surprisingly good-sounding records are those from the late 1920s. The earliest of these dates from 1926, and contains a touching performance of the orchestral version of the Good Friday Spell by Siegfried Wagner, the composer's son by his second wife, Cosima Liszt von Bülow. It presents an example not so much of how Richard himself conducted the work—for Siegfried was only thirteen when his father died in 1883—as of how *Parsifal* was performed at Bayreuth in the last decade of the nineteenth century and after. Even more important—and more accurately performed—are the records made the next year at Bayreuth. The two conductors on these discs are Siegfried Wagner and Karl Muck, the splendid German conductor who was forced to abandon the leadership of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1918 because of anti-German feeling during the war. The most important soloist on these records is the Russian bass Alexander Kipnis, whose combination of emotional warmth and rock-solid vocal production in the role of Gurnemanz has never been equalled. Elsewhere, the stars are the conductors, the orchestra, and the chorus: the particular hallmark of this performance is the feeling of inevitable flow, a far cry indeed from the tendency of most conductors either to milk the work for its lushness or to push on to avoid what they see as its *longeurs*. Much the same can be said for Muck's 1927 recording, with the Berlin Opera Orchestra, of the Prelude to Act I and his 1928 recording (also with the Berlin) of the Prelude to Act III and, after a short cut, Act III itself. Indeed, I can think of no other example of an almost one-hour-long segment of a Wagner opera led by a conductor whose major musical career goes back to the 1880s.[5]

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5 The Siegfried Wagner performance of the Good Friday Spell, along with other performances of his father's (and even of his own) music, is contained on EMI (Germany) 1C 147-30 647/48 (deleted). The 1927 Bayreuth performances are mostly available on a recent LP transfer, "One Hundred Years of Parsifal," EMI (Germany) 1C 137-78 174/75. Unfortunately, the S. Wagner-Muck Bayreuth performances are incomplete on this set; they are even interspersed with performances by other worthy, though in this context irrelevant, artists. The Berlin-Muck Acts I and III Preludes are available on an excellent cassette transfer, In Sync C4136. The long stretch of Muck's Act III is available in a splendid transfer on Preiser (Austria) LV100.

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There are at least four important excerpts from Parsifal on 78 RPM records made during the years from 1930 to 1941. The first of these is a stunning performance of Kundry's great dramatic scene from Act II, sung by Frida Leider, still for many knowledgeable people the greatest Isolde and Kundry on disc. Her forte in this music was womanly passion, somewhat in the manner of Lotte Lehmann but with rather greater vocal resource and less lurking girlishness. From Berlin in 1938 come deeply imagined performances of the Prelude to Act I and the Good Friday Spell by Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic; the same year saw a recording of Parsifal's final passage in Act III sung by Lauritz Melchior, perhaps the most manly sounding and vocally the best-equipped tenor in the history of the role. In 1940, Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad recorded a major portion of Act II. There is little chance that in our lifetime we will ever hear such stunning vocalism so musically delivered.[6]

The seven commercially recorded complete sets of the opera begin with a performance from the 1951 Bayreuth Festival (the first Festival since World War II) conducted by the eminent Wagnerian Hans Knappertsbusch. This recording features Wolfgang Windgassen as an adequate Parsifal, Ludwig Weber as a rich-voiced though slightly shaky Gurnemanz, and Marta Mödl as an impassioned if also unsteady Kundry. What the performance itself actually sounded like I can't know, but the recording conveys the impression of distance, almost as if one were able to perceive dimly through it the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach as he visited foreign lands and peoples. By contrast, Knappertsbusch's recording from the 1962 Bayreuth Festival possesses much greater sonic presence and brilliance; it is also distinguished by a heart-warming performance of Gurnemanz by Hans Hotter, who was musically and dramatically great though vocally unsteady. Knappertsbusch is perhaps the best conductor to have led *Parsifal* on records since the war, approaching Muck in his feeling for an unhurried long line which nevertheless always moves ahead.

Perhaps the most peculiar *Parsifal* ever commercially recorded is that of Pierre Boulez, whose 1970 Bayreuth performance managed to set speed records, at least for a commercial recording. As always with Boulez, one can admire his integrity in avoiding sentimental interpretative clichés; but one can also gasp at his frequent incomprehension of the seriousness of the music. Boulez's soloists too—among them James King as Parsifal, Franz Crass as Gurnemanz, and Gwyneth Jones as Kundry—seem uncomfortable, or miscast.

An uncommonly rich-sounding recording was produced in 1972 by Georg Solti with the Vienna Philharmonic; the soloists included René Kollo as Parsifal, Gottlob Frick as Gurnemanz, and Christa Ludwig as Kundry. Here the problem lay not in any detailed interpretative shortcomings, but rather in the recording's disjointed quality, produced perhaps by the conductor's failure to grasp the architecture of the piece as a whole, or perhaps, more simply, by the excessive number of splices used in making up the final master tape.

The long-awaited Herbert von Karajan recording of *Parsifal* with the Berlin Philharmonic appeared in 1981. The first multitrack digital operatic recording ever made, this set displays the clarity which the digital process makes possible, and exploits the ability of separate tracking to alter the perspective with which the listener hears individual voices and instruments. The temptation to use these opportunities in order to present a result not ever possible in a live performance in an opera house must have been irresistible for both conductor and

6 The Leider performance can be found on the EMI "One Hundred Years of Parsifal" discs described above, EMI (Germany) 1C 137-78 174/75. The Furtwängler Act I Prelude and the Good Friday Spell is transferred on Seraphim 1B-6024. The Melchior excerpt from Act III was available some years ago on LP as Victrola VIC-1500; the Melchior-Flagstad Act II section was available in this country some years ago on LP as RCA LM-2763.

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technical personnel. When to this wayward technological freedom was added Karajan's insistence on separately conducting each note of the melodic line, and each harmony around it, the result could only be—and was—an artificially confected musical outcome, full of local beauties and empty of a coherent, large-scale, artistic content. As frequently happens with Karajan, so strong is the pressure of his interpretative personality that his soloists—here including Peter Hofmann as Parsifal, Kurt Moll as Gurnemanz, and Dunja Vejzovic as Kundry—seem unable to develop any individual characterization of their roles.

In 1982, the year after the release of the Karajan recording, a new recording of *Parsifal* came from France, bringing together the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo (and the Prague Philharmonic Choir) under Armin Jordan, and a cast of soloists including Reiner Goldberg as Parsifal, Robert Lloyd as Gurnemanz, and Yvonne Minton as Kundry. The recording was made to provide the soundtrack for a film of the opera by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, and it is a dramatically unauthoritative product of the recordist's art, projecting an over-smooth, over-cushioned, and altogether languid account of a musical score which requires strong contours of rhythm and phrasing to remain interesting.

The newest *Parsifal,* just released in this country by Angel, comes from the English conductor Reginald Goodall and the Welsh National Opera. Goodall is something of a cult figure; he emerged in the 1970s as the conductor of a massively slow *Ring* cycle at London's English National Opera. The recordings of these *Ring* performances—slow, weighty, and stiff—are monuments to a century-old love affair of the English with Wagner as thinker; whether the thinking in question was in fact philosophical or just musical seems to matter little. Goodall's *Parsifal,* admittedly done with a second-class orchestra and not quite first-class soloists, seems beset by good intentions. Overall, the performance lacks any sense of momentum, so that the effect becomes one of Wagner imitating the Debussy of *Pelléas et Mélisande* rather than (as actually was the case) of Debussy imitating Wagner.

The many "pirate" Bayreuth recordings from the 1950s and the 1960s seem largely either to duplicate or to fail to equal the two commercial Knappertsbusch sets. One important exception to this rule is the 1953 Clemens Krauss performance, remarkably fast (it comes on only four LPs, whereas all the commercial recordings occupy five) but also remarkably pointed, purposive, and insightful. Here is the viable alternative to the deliberateness of Muck and Knappertsbusch; though the cast seems no better than the usual run of Bayreuth casts during this period, the real star was the conductor, a man who managed not just to be a great musician but also to be an intellectual: it was he who wrote the brilliant libretto for Richard Strauss's wonderful last opera, *Capriccio* (1941).[7]

A word too must be spared for a decided oddity, the 1950 Rome radio broadcast of *Parsifal* conducted by Vittorio Gui, with Africo Baldelli as Parsifal, Boris Christoff as Gurnemanz, and Maria Callas as Kundry. Despite the distinction of the singers, the fact that the performance is sung in Italian disqualifies it from serious consideration as a vehicle for conveying either the dramatic content of the opera or the proper musical sound of the vocal parts. But—and this is a significant point in its favor—the orchestra under Gui plays with something vastly more important than the accuracy to which it scarcely aspires: a kind of love of music and concern for the melodies which only Italian musicians and orchestras seem to display toward Wagner. That this is not an isolated

7 The 1951 Knappertsbusch set was recently available in England as Decca GOM 504-8; the 1962 set is still available in this country as Philips 6747250. The Boulez set was available until recently as Deutsche Grammophon 2720 034. The Solti set is still available as London 1510. The Karajan set is available on Deutsche Grammophon 2741 002, the Jordan set is Erato 750106, and the Goodall set is Angel EMI DSE 3972.

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phenomenon, restricted to the Gui *Parsifal,* is amply demonstrated on the 1953 Furtwängler Rome radio recordings of the *Ring,* where once again musical feeling outweighs any lack of mere efficiency in playing the notes.[8]

So, on balance, the musical verdict—at least for the record purchaser—seems clear. Buy the LP transfers of the 78 RPM electrical records if and when they are available; for a complete performance, the 1962 Knappertsbusch seems the best current bet, with the 1951 Knappertsbusch a close second. Here, alas, as elsewhere in music performance today, the older performances are so much more satisfying.

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8 The 1953 Krauss Bayreuth performance is available on Melodram 533, and the 1950 Gui Rome radio performance is available on Foyer FO 1002.

The wider problem of *Parsifal* as an artwork, of course, remains. Not for the first time with Wagner, after all, does one come up against the contradiction: the music is beautiful, the effect moving, the drama probably specious—at least for an adult—and the underlying ideas malignant. There seems little doubt that Wagner will go on being seen as a great composer, even as one of the greatest. Perhaps there is one important point to be drawn from this whole intellectual imbroglio. Since kings aren't musicians or philosophers, we shall have to accept that musicians and philosophers aren't kings, nor should they be. Then life can at least go on, and we will be able to listen to great music, even when, were we to take the origins of its effect seriously, we would be either appalled—or just plain embarrassed.

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Poems *by Donald Petersen & Elizabeth Spires*

The eye egg

As blind potato eyes in darkness sprout, the eye
Hatched before the dawn of light, not knowing why.

What, if not touch, could give it such necessity
To reach through darkness till the light was born to see?

Home was good, food was good, fed through the gut.
Space was seamless, warm, and humming. Time held. But

Touch thrust up, and opening length and breadth and height
Before it, moved among them in a field of light,

Till grits of seeds their cases burst, and flowers sprang,
And all their atoms, in the light of morning, sang:

"What though no mercy called us forth, no greater eye
Regards us or takes notice when we droop and die?

"We praise, with all our tingling particles and quarks,
Whatever programmed us and runs through us and works."

—Donald Petersen

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Smiling for Foggerson

Graduation Photo

Sunlight shafts through the late primaveral air
As you stand, looking back, on the stair.
It lights in your hair on the perfect hair part
Where your skin has the whiteness of fish. It drowns
In the bronze of your face, in the pitch of your eyes,
Where glints and flashes of it dart below.
A triangle of it shines on your fortified bust.
A curve of it graces your buttocks supple and full.
A facet of it lies on your ankle bone
Whose delicate movements are mankind's undoing.

You smile as if you could guess what Foggerson knows
And will not, for fear of spoiling the pose, declare:
That the pleats in your skirt will never need ironing,
That your bracelet bangles will jingle no more,
That the cashmere sweater over the good foundation
Will never come off again for any reason
Or show any signs of wear, that your natural teeth
In their natural box will never chatter or tarnish.
In the midst of life we *are* in death:
The death's head shows through the Cupid's bows.

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So smile till we know how much of your skull is teeth.
Foggerson sees you always, just as you are,
Though you lose all recollection of him
And droop, sag, whiten, and settle in dust.
He is not even part of your shadow, but only in him
Will you be perfect, this moment, here. Now go
And still smile. Smile till the lines in your face
Deepen and set in a conventional scowl.
Scowl down the years till the years
Are frozen and you can no longer dissemble:
Before this you were nothing, and nothing after.

But along with it all, and more than it all, this You—
The hope, the longing, the fulfillment—
Smiling not because anyone prodded you to,
But lips parted in joy of expectation,
As if just at this moment came to you
The invisible shuttle that slithers through the years,
Threading the furthest stars,
Aimed at you, for once, now whirling in you.
Quick, now, it's going to be
A good one—there, you've done it together.
On Foggerson's black plate you will live forever.

—Donald Petersen

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That door

You whom he pressed so closely that you shied,
So he could not reach you—
You whom he could not touch
As he touches you now,
Twenty years later, with his sonnet—

Poor, square fretwork. Over you—
Your banded wings, your shielded breasts,
Your trained, resilient bangs,
Your thonged and lacquered toes—
He made himself a fool.

Now you feel, some days, like a dried-up stalk,
To be played by the wind. You hold
The wrung hands, the spread fingers
Laid without pressure on the door,
As if to wave it open—

So you, batting your lashes, might fly away,
From room to room and floor to floor,
Daring his pent-up wishes to alight you—
As if your shyest wish could open,
After these years, that door.

—Donald Petersen

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Solitary woman

Close was enough, but any closer,
More than you could bear.
Seated inside,

Eating, I, a sometime talker often
Struck dumb, glimpsed you
And shuddered,

Considering the glory of your estate:
To wait always hungrily
At the Great Door.

If one had kept you under a gentle
Thumb when you were younger,
If one had not

Let you taste of the bruised black
Radishes dabbled in shoyu
And attar of sesame,

If one had not at first unfolded, then
Pulled out from under you
The Khalabar,

It would have been different. As it was,
Glancing inside, you paused,
Sensing the threshold.

So it was not without forbearance,
Refusing to be admitted
You had come.

Yaddo, 1971

—Donald Petersen

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This not that

Let this lie on a shelf
Or in a drawer, lightless.
Don't try to read this,
Don't try to right this.
Let it lie one hundred
Days. This, not that.
And to pass the time, try.

Try to fry a shrimp chip
Without frying fingers.
Try to pluck the petals off
A maelstrom lily. Try
To fly. Try to die
To the world without
Leaving it for a minute.

This works thus. It clicks
And, with luck, goes.
Pale prophets leap out of
Crazed frescoes. Snow
Peaks burst, hot magma flows,
Locked in a sounding box
Of images and echoes.

—Donald Petersen

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These nights when the wind blows,
I lay my head on the pillow,
I lay my head on white feathers,
white down, tag ends of Memory.
White feathers, white down,
I'm wrapped in a nightgown stiffening,
year by year, against the cold.
My arms hug the pillow, light
as a feather when we lie in love's
weather, but tonight I sleep alone,
the closet full of skeletons that grin
in the chilly breeze. Starving,
they climb love's zero by degrees,
as I will, the pillow dreaming
furious dreams. Dreams not my own.

—Elizabeth Spires

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Photography

Academic Surrealism

by Jed Perl

When the art historian Rosalind Krauss writes an essay she doesn't just offer a few observations, she sets out to prove a point. Krauss is one of the founders of *October,* the magazine that brought Marxist and structuralist theory into the foreground of contemporary criticism, and she and the magazine have a genius for making the messy, inconclusive flux of history look like a series of battles where the lines are always clearly drawn. Krauss makes sure every fact that pokes its head into her field of vision is put in its proper place, and at the end of an essay she always comes out with a ringing conclusion. Maybe this is why her writing has such a devoted following. She promises to iron out all the problems, and her readers tolerate the often creaky mechanisms of theory because they know a big job is getting done.

Krauss, who in the past has written a good deal about Surrealist photography, has now produced—in collaboration with Jane Livingston, chief curator at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—a show and a book called "L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism."[1] Krauss's two thematically linked catalogue essays—"Photography in the Service of Surrealism" and "Corpus Delicti"—aren't especially long, but they represent quite a gallop across the variegated terrain of 1920s and 1930s Surrealist Paris. Krauss's writing casts such a deep shadow across "L'Amour fou" that you can't really get to the show until you've gone through her contributions to the catalogue. These are tough essays to get a handle on, because they achieve a tone of high moral seriousness by means of more than a little sleight of hand: they're object lessons in the abuse of metaphoric language. Krauss eases us into an argument by pretending she's just making an analogy. Then "A," which began as similar to "B," turns into "B"—and suddenly Krauss is taking all sorts of undemonstrated and probably undemonstrable connections for granted. She wonders if the various photographers who are called Surrealist "in fact constitute some kind of unified visual field." Here the "some kind of" gives a homespun touch and lets us imagine the "unified visual field" as an ordinary metaphor. But immediately Krauss wonders, "Can we conceive this field as an aesthetic category?" "Some kind of" is now "this" and an image which originally evoked a group of works of art in the real world has been turned into a theoretical construct. "Conceive" is also fairly slippery—the word suggests all sorts of unspecified mental processes.

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1 "L'Amour fou" will be on view at the Corcoran Gallery until November 17. From there it travels to the San Francisco Museum of Art (December 13-February 9, 1986), the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (April 15-June 16), and the Hayward Gallery in London (July 10-October 5). The exhibition's catalogue—*L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*—was published by Abbeville Press (272 pages, $45; $24.95 at participating museums).

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By stringing together many surprising little phrases and leaving out all the connective tissue of thought Krauss achieves in her prose a bold, modernist tone. She writes sentences that present a series of discrete impressions. But she uses this slightly fey, collage-style prose as a rhetorical device to get readers over the lacunae in her argument. She's trying to prove things with a prose style that when used properly suggests the essentially unverifiable nature of experience. Here's a typical Krauss sentence: "Psychic automatism is itself a written form, a 'scribbling on paper,' a textual production." By leaving out the logical connection between "scribbling on paper" and "textual production" Krauss avoids having to explain why "scribbling" is necessarily "textual." It isn't, yet when you come to the end of her sentence the connection is already taken for granted. Krauss builds a house of argument from unbaked bricks.

Somewhere in the middle of "Photography in the Service of Surrealism" readers will encounter a rather simple point: Man Ray and the other photographers isolate, juxtapose, and turn upside-down our images of the world. But this thought is so encrusted with the rhetoric of signs and texts that, like the tortoise whom Des Esseintes covers with precious stones in Huysmans's *A Rebours,* what was alive in Krauss's essay is killed off—suffocated, really—by her rather baroque theoretical stance. It's hard to know whether Krauss has been bamboozled by her subject or is just bamboozling us. I'm not sure if she writes about pictures as if they were texts in order to convince herself pictures are more susceptible to line-by-line readings than they really are, or if she writes this way in order to convince us she has a firmer grasp on the material than she really does. Whatever the reason, Krauss wants to uncover within Surrealist photography an order which parallels the structure of human language. Krauss believes Man Ray and the other Surrealist photographers use images in the way we all use sounds and words when we talk: as units to be combined and juxtaposed for meaning. She seems to think the meanings in these Surrealist photographs exist in the world before the photographer finds them. I know this sounds rather bizarre, but what else can Krauss mean when she says "photography reveals [the] world as written?" (Whether by the "world" she means the world of nature or of culture we are never told.) When Krauss reproduces a Brassaï female nude photographed to look like a phallus, she intends to demonstrate not Brassaï's eye for the erotic but "the camera's ability to find and isolate what we could call the world's constant production of erotic symbols, its ceaseless automatic writing." When Krauss asserts that these erotic symbols have a reality outside the minds of men and women, she is, whether she knows it or not, telling us that nature or culture or both are self-consciously erotic. "World" becomes in Krauss's essays rather like the "History" of the old Marxists: an impersonal force which exists outside the power or consciousness of any particular individual or group of individuals. This leaves the artist in a subservient role. Artists aren't creators, they're just language instructors, teaching us the secret linguistic patterns of the Kraussian World.

Krauss doesn't carry on a very complicated linguistic argument and the only specific theory she offers is one that's been pretty broadly disseminated. This is the idea, from structural linguistics, that we can observe the beginnings of language in the child's doubling of simple sounds to produce words. Krauss uses the example of "pa," which when doubled comes to mean father. She illustrates her text with an example of photographic doubling: a 1928 Man Ray of two pairs of breasts, one floating above the other. The doubling in baby talk connects with a complex, highly flexible system of meaning we're all acquainted with; it may help to suggest the beginnings of our system of language. But doubling, per se, isn't the same as language. If I see one copy of a poster on a wall and then two copies of the same poster on another wall, I don't necessarily get different messages. If a car horn

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goes "honk-honk" or a cow goes "moo-moo," this doesn't necessarily tell us more than if the car goes "honk" or the cow goes "moo." (I'm talking about hearing a sound; not about the difference in written language between the verb honk and the noun honk-honk.) In the case of the Man Ray, we might almost say that doubling reduces or confuses meaning. One pair of breasts is a recognizable "sign." Two pairs of breasts juxtaposed are a conundrum, which is of course just the point of the Man Ray. But what does this have to do with human language?

Krauss would like to pin down the quintessentially impressionistic concepts so dear to the Surrealists. She presents a 1938 photo-collage by André Breton as the Rosetta stone that conclusively connects Surrealist photography and automatic writing. This collage is a self-portrait of Breton, who is shown holding—but not looking into—a microscope. The inscription at the bottom reads "L'écriture automatique." Krauss sees Breton in this little collage as "the surrealist seer, armed with vision"—that is, with a microscope. "But," she continues, "this condition of vision produces images, and these images are understood as a textual product, hence the title *Automatic Writing*." This is a neat example of Krauss's slip-and-slide prose. Why is being "armed with vision" necessarily a "condition of vision"? What *is* a "condition of vision?" And by whom is this understood? And even if this little analysis does make sense, why does it leave out so much of what is going on in the collage? What does Krauss have to say about the prison bars, the movie starlet who smiles at Breton, the two animals who fly out of the microscope, and the two books lying on a table? Now I don't know what all the elements add up to, but so long as Krauss offers no coherent iconography it's hard to believe the title *Automatic Writing* is more than a vague, metaphoric reference to the commingling of many, odd bits.

Krauss takes Breton for a man with a coherent line of thought, when really he was an instinctual intellectual who did a few zany collages and wrote reams of woolly nonsense, in the midst of which there are nuggets of good common sense and a great many rockets of inspired and inspiring speculation. Even when Breton makes good political sense, as in the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," where he and Trotsky defend the absolute independence of art, you don't feel this is the result of dialectical reasoning so much as an instinctual reaction to the totalitarian monstrosities of the time.

At the beginning of "Photography in the Service of Surrealism" Krauss wonders why photography, the most naturalistic of all the visual arts, is so closely linked with Surrealism—which was, in Krauss's words, "defined from the start as a revolution in values, a reorganization of the very way the real was conceived." Krauss calls this a "paradox." She obviously delights in such paradoxes, and she makes this one seem more paradoxical than it probably is by neglecting to point out that the Surrealists liked anything surprising, and that photographs are, as we all know, full of the unexpected. As a theorist, Krauss is probably reluctant to admit to something as ordinary as surprise, since it makes the Surrealist infatuation with photography look like a romantic love affair or a scene from a boudoir farce. By her lights the Surrealists were all very serious, absorbed full-time in an arduous reorganization of the world. Krauss hardly seems to care what the subjects of particular photographs happen to be. Despite the violent imagery of the Surrealists, she has almost nothing to say about what Walter Benjamin called "the cult of evil" in Surrealism. For Krauss, the subjects that Man Ray and the others pick up on are little more than mice in a lab. She isn't interested in the mice, only in the operations performed on them. The Surrealist photographers become here master surgeons who, in Krauss's words, are "cutting into the body of the world."

Krauss passes over the fantastical, mannerist taste of Breton and the Surrealist photographers. The opening of Breton's book

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L'Amour fou, which gives the show its name and is made to sound in Krauss's analysis like a point-by-point thesis, really consists of a chain of marvelous, picturesque fancies. *L'Amour fou* is like an Italian cheesecake chock-full of the candied fruits of romantic caves, bizarre stalactites, and tropical forests. When Surrealist essays are really engrossing they resemble the slightly demented chatter of great friends who've stayed up all night weaving skeins of wild speculation. The morning after much of this falls flat. But some of the Surrealist's verbal escapades, like the great litany of names in the First Manifesto ("Swift is Surrealist in malice," etc.), have turned out to last. Krauss misses the extent to which Surrealist culture is the great after-hours party of the West: what Benjamin called "the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia."

Krauss is an academic explainer who's gotten in way over her head. She suffers from the worst kind of intellectual's disease: the obsession with finding a great theory to explain every batch of facts. She's so hung up on complicated explanations she can't grasp simple ones. In her essay "Corpus Delicti" she makes a road stop at Roland Barthes's last book, *Camera Lucida.* Krauss seems to think *Camera Lucida* will bolster her argument—Barthes is a certified, "Now"-style thinker. But she's missed the whole point of the Barthes book, which is precisely a rejection of the overelaborated theory Krauss holds dear. Barthes believes we respond to photographs in an instinctive, private way. He uses the term "punctum" to describe the mysterious shock of recognition a person sometimes feels in looking at one particular element in a photograph. (This can be a gesture, a part of a body, a piece of clothing.) The central image in *Camera Lucida*—of the author's mother in her youth—isn't even reproduced, because, as Barthes explains, it can't mean to us what it means to him. Barthes sees the "punctum" as an inexplicable moment of intuition. When Krauss brings in the idea of the "punctum" toward the end of her essay it's as if she's become her own guerrilla team. The Barthe-

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sian bomb of the private subconscious is placed right under Krauss's theory of the communal unconscious. It's an inexplicable end to an inexplicable argument.

The catalogue of "L'Amour fou" promises the show will question standard museological practices: we're being offered a radical view of the museum to rhyme with a radical view of the art. Krauss and Livingston warn us they have challenged the "current santification of the vintage print" and that they "wished to take certain liberties with the images . . . displayed, both liberties of scale and format." In fact the show comes out looking pretty much like an ordinary show. I was glad for the few touches that evoke the experimental aura of the old Surrealist salons: the pinkish walls, the cases full of Surrealist periodicals and the photo blow-ups. At the entrance to the exhibition visitors are greeted by a shadow box with a glove inside, and later there's a display case where a group of Surrealist postcards is set on crimson moiré. Too much of this would have turned "L'Amour fou" into a Colonial Williamsburg of Surrealism shows—which isn't a pretty thought. But I suspect Krauss and Livingston had other reasons for not filling the show with baubles and geegaws. The selection of photographs suggests a reluctance to embrace the Surrealist delight in oddball objects. Krauss and Livingston exclude many of Man Ray's most famous photographs of objects—the metronome with the eye, the apple with the screw—and include only a few pre-Surrealist photographs of the sort Surrealists liked to collect as ancestral images. Krauss, I think, doesn't want to emphasize how much the Surrealists—many of whom as Marxists regarded the commodity as a fetish of capitalist culture—were thoroughly and self-consciously seduced by the fetishistic element in objects. "L'Amour fou" shows the Surrealists as a bunch of overgrown adolescent boys drooling over female flesh, but it doesn't show us enough of their pockets full of odd finds: marbles, wrappers, and unidentifiable contraptions.

As for Krauss and Livingston's selection of artists, it leaves the pecking order of Surrealist photography pretty much intact. There's Man Ray and not much else. Man Ray is the only artist in the show who has a real feeling for form (Brassaï has it, but he's marginal to the movement). In the rayographs—abstract compositions Man Ray created by placing objects directly onto light-sensitive photographic paper—the tones are wonderfully sharp. The lights and darks sound off against one another, and the various oddly silhouetted forms convey distinct emotional weights and colorations. In the Man Ray nudes these same qualities are abetted by the photographer's unabashed delight in the female body. Man Ray is the only Surrealist photographer who understands what Western figure art is all about, and the curves of his nudes resonate oddly but powerfully with the arabesques of nineteenth-century art, especially that of Ingres. These qualities of tone and design give Man Ray's photographs a visual brilliance found nowhere else in "L'Amour fou"; but there's also a cleverness to his vision, and this tends to keep his work in a minor key. Man Ray is a master, but he's a little master—a major minor artist. He seems to hold in twentieth-century art the same sort of position the engraver Wenzel Hollar holds in seventeenth-century art. Hollar—a Bohemian who spent many years in England—is revered today for his town views, his quirky images of sea animals, little dogs, and odd bits of fur clothing, and for his fine copies after the Old Masters. Hollar shares roughly the same world view as Ruysdael and Vermeer and Metsu, but his sight isn't nearly as penetrating as theirs. Yet Hollar has his own sensibility—a unique way of approaching the conventions of his time—and this gives to everything he does a certain specialness. To me, that's about the size of Man Ray's art. He doesn't see the world differently from the big masters—from Picasso and Miró and Giacometti—but he gives to this world a special, camera-crazy, American-in-Surrealist-Paris touch (Man Ray's paintings are little more than endearing, and this is

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only because of the obviousness of their effects.)

Around Man Ray "L'Amour fou" assembles a dozen or so photographers, most of little quality. Georges Hugnet's collages are soggy jokes, and Maurice Tabard's overlapping limbs and faces have a neurasthenic quality that belies his training in the studies of various turn-of-the-century American portrait photographers. Jacques-André Boiffard, who was an assistant to Man Ray, is a favorite with Krauss and Livingston. His shots of big toes (which were meant to illustrate an article by Bataille) have a boldness and a minimalist pizzazz—but I wouldn't want to see them more than once. The aspect of Boiffard I find rather appealing is biographical: after a decade or so as a Surrealist he returned to his medical studies. Sometimes Surrealism seems more intriguing as a time of life than as a lifetime career. Dora Maar—who's still alive—is another dropout from the movement. Apparently she's now a religious mystic and refuses to talk to anyone who's interested in her Surrealist days. (She wouldn't let her work be reproduced in the catalogue.) "L'Amour fou" is mostly a procession of odd, half-cooked careers.

Boiffard and Hans Bellmer are probably the only photographers who Krauss and Livingston would like to put right up there in the Surrealist pantheon next to Man Ray. They're both extremely well represented; Bellmer gets a room of his own. Bellmer's work starts from the very natural observation that there's something weirdly human about dolls—we didn't need the Surrealists to tell us this. Bellmer makes a whole career out of one little idea, and he hammers it into you in image after image until you feel he's banging your brain against a piece of concrete. No doubt Krauss finds Bellmer's photographs important for the extensive series of operations he performs on the human body. Bellmer's dolls are tumescent nightmares: they grow breasts and legs and feet everywhere, and he photographs them anywhich-way, at random. He's a misogynist gone berserk in Surrealism's dreamland. The images are redeemed by no visual poetry —the formal anarchy matches the moral anarchy. Edmund Wilson once observed of the marquis de Sade that de Sade "is often repulsive and often dull, and often both at the same time." Wilson went on to devote many pages to all the things that interested him about the marquis; but his brief negative characterization says just about all you can say about Hans Bellmer.

"L'Amour fou" is a close-focus, no-loose-ends exhibition. Though it would be impossible to mount a Surrealist show without some jokes and flights of fancy, at "L'Amour fou" the most dour and austere elements are consistently brought to the fore. I understand why Krauss and Livingston include none of Man Ray's portraits in the show—they aren't, strictly speaking, Surrealist photographs. But Man Ray's portrait subjects are often the major figures of the Surrealist world, and his lush, close-up portrait style is formally related to the more surreal images. Some portraits would have helped to open up the show and reveal Surrealism as a real movement full of real people; but this is clearly not Krauss and Livingston's idea. By restricting the show to artists who were in one place at one time (and including someone like Lee Miller even though she's a mediocre photographer) the show gives the Surrealist movement a solitary feel it didn't have. Krauss and Livingston do nothing to illuminate the relation of Surrealist to non-Surrealist tendencies in the 1920s and 1930s. Mums the word on the formal echoes between Man Ray and a photographer of a very different ideological stripe, such as Edward Weston. With Krauss, ideology is destiny; and she has no intention of testing this hypothesis in the world of forms, where it seldom holds up. She's also unwilling to show work in which the radical political ideology of the movement is diluted but its imagery is carried on. I believe late blooming Surrealists like Bill Brandt (who was working with Man Ray in Paris in those years) and Clarence John Laughlin deserve some place here. Perhaps Krauss and Livingston find their photographs too com-

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placent and sentimental in their use of Surrealist imagery: maybe they don't like Brandt's Victorianism and Laughlin's steamy Southern Gothic. But Brandt is a photographer with a genuinely Surrealist knack for odd juxtapositions, and Laughlin is one of the few fantastical photographers whose work is actually pleasing to look at.

As it is, the show brings into very high relief the obsessional, hothouse atmosphere of Surrealism. By the time you arrive at the midpoint of "L'Amour fou" Surrealist photography has been brought to the boiling point, and what's on the stove is, pretty much from first to last, woman's body. Barthes in *Camera Lucida* makes much of the difference between eroticism and pornography, but photography isn't always able to keep the two apart. One's curiosity about Lee Miller's chest—the subject of three poster-size blowups of Man Ray photographs that are suspended from the ceiling of the largest gallery in the show—isn't exactly distinguishable from the curiosity that makes us stop for a moment at the nudie pics on the newsstand. Miller's body is such a model of classical perfection, it knocks out whatever weak attempts these humdrum Man Rays make in the direction of artifice and design.

Krauss and Livingston deal gingerly with the rampant eroticism of the show. They probably feel uncomfortable admiring these photographs in which women are regarded as the most titillating pieces of kinetic sculpture in the world. I understand why they want to demonstrate the images aren't anti-woman. But their explanations sound overly defensive, and they end up by obscuring the place of Woman within Surrealism. Livingston writes about Man Ray's nudes in a way that reminds me a bit of John Elderfield's essay on Matisse's drawings in the catalogue for MOMA's show last spring. For both Livingston and Elderfield aesthetic quality has the effect of toning down or even erasing erotic content. According to Livingston Man Ray "summoned his own trained artistic vision, shaped in part by Stieglitz and Duchamp, to skirt the dangerous territory of sexist exploitation that stretched before him." Krauss's brief discussion of the female content of Surrealism is both more elaborate and more obscure. "If within surrealist poetry *woman* was constantly in construction, then at certain moments that project could at least prefigure a next step, in which a reading is opened onto deconstruction. It is for this reason that the frequent characterizations of surrealism as anti-feminist seem to me to be mistaken." Put simply, what Krauss is saying is that one sort of radical thinking can always lead to another sort of radical thought. This may be true some of the time, but in the present case it proves nothing except that you can appear to prove anything at all.

Krauss and Livingston are wrong to couch their reactions to the photographs in terms of vague, general assumptions. If they want to get at the sexual politics of Surrealist art they'd do best to begin with their own immediate reactions. (I'm not asking for true confessions, just for an empiricism that begins at home.) I realize the issue of whether one likes or dislikes a Hans Bellmer is, for Krauss, probably beside the point, but I might remind her of how important the direct, unmediated response was for Barthes (whom she reveres). Maybe what Krauss and Livingston really want to tell us is that they love these photographs. Whether I agree with their taste or not, I'd consider that an honorable position. Just once, I'd like to see someone write: "This picture is abhorrent to every moral principal I hold dear, but I love it anyway." Now there would be a real demonstration of *l'amour fou*.

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Architecture

Dartmouth's Hood Museum

by Roger Kimball

While the burgeoning splendor of the New England foliage is itself sufficient reason to travel north in the autumn, this year one found oneself drawn to Hanover, New Hampshire, to witness a display of cultural as well as natural exuberance. For at the end of September, Dartmouth College threw open its arms and welcomed a host of outsiders to help celebrate the start of its two hundred and sixteenth year and the dedication of its latest cultural acquisition, the Hood Museum of Art.

Designed by Charles W. Moore and Chad Floyd of the firm of Centerbrook in Essex, Connecticut, the Hood Museum is named for the Dartmouth alumnus and milk-products magnate Harvey P. Hood, whose benefactions to the college, one was frequently reminded, were both numerous and large. The new museum takes its place at the center of Dartmouth's campus. It connects Wilson Hall, a late nineteenth-century brick Romanesque building that Moore and his associates have thoroughly renovated as part of the project, and Wallace K. Harrison's 1962 Hopkins Center for the Performing Arts, a sprawling, unlovely edifice whose façade gruesomely foreshadows Harrison's Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, which was built a few years later. Together, the three structures constitute a performing and visual-arts complex that is replete with exhibition galleries, theaters, auditoriums, rehearsal and studio spaces, a sculpture courtyard, and a café.

Great fanfare attended the dedication of the Hood Museum. The festivities began on September 23, when the painter Frank Stella, who had been an artist-in-residence at Dartmouth in 1963, returned to receive an honorary degree and to become the first artist in Dartmouth's history to deliver the address at the college's convocation ceremony. Stella praised the Hood, but he also spoke frankly to the assembled faculty and students of Dartmouth College about the proper vocation of the university art museum. Its real purpose, he suggested, is not to provide us with an encyclopedia of style or a comprehensive overview of the history of art; it is to initiate us into the wonders of art's visual richness, to help teach us to *see*. In this sense, the educational value of the small museum can be said to come primarily "from the quality of its use rather than the quality of its objects."

I found it difficult to disagree. After all, how many college museums can really compete with the distinguished art museums at Harvard, Yale, or Smith, let alone with the great public museums? And while Stella insisted that "the university must have an art museum," he warned against the temptation of seeing "the ideal small museum as a reduction of the ideal big museum." "The prospect of a miniaturized Metropolitan Museum," he noted, "seems more amusing than desirable." It remains to be seen whether or not Dartmouth will take Stella's observations to heart.

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Later in the week, luncheons and dinners and receptions—many of them black-tie affairs—not to mention tours and speeches and sundry other events commemorated the Hood Museum's opening. Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic for *The New York Times,* spoke to an auditorium full of eager celebrants, and Charles Moore gave a brief talk and slide presentation on the place of historical allusion in contemporary architecture. Following Moore's talk the Concord String Quartet performed Beethoven's F minor Quartet, Opus 95. I had to miss the conference on "Art versus Artifact," though, reflecting upon the heterogeneous collection of art and ethnographic objects that the Hood Museum is charged with preserving and exhibiting in its small compass, I appreciated the pertinent opposition expressed in its title. The celebration concluded with "Dartmouth in Hollywood," a film that was especially produced for the occasion. I had to miss that, too, but I suspect that the press release describing the film as tracing "interrelationships between Dartmouth and Hollywood since D. W. Griffith's filming of 'Way Down East' on the nearby White River in 1919" already said rather more than one wanted to know.

Now the opening of a new museum designed by Charles Moore and his colleagues is itself a noteworthy event. Moore, along with Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, and Philip Johnson, must be counted among the most prominent senior practitioners of that brand of self-consciously historicizing architecture that, for better or worse, we have come to call "postmodern." Johnson's notorious AT&T building, Graves's Portland Public Service building or his much-discussed design for expanding the Whitney Museum, Venturi's various "decorated sheds," or Moore's own Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans: all are examples of the genre.

When one reflects upon such concoctions —which stand as admonitory reminders of the crisis in contemporary architecture—one can only be grateful for the restraint that Moore displayed in his design of the Hood. For while the museum is by no means without flaws—a subject to which I shall presently return—it possesses a measure of simplicity and forthrightness that sets it apart from many other postmodernist creations. There are no Corinthian pilasters with shiny metal capitals or wall fountains in the shape of the architect's head, as there are at Piazza d'Italia; there is no neon and little extravagant use of color; nor is the museum ornamented with Egyptoid or Chippendale elements, other notable signatures of postmodernist fancy. In fact, it is a testimony to the architects' skill and sensitivity here that the new museum succeeds as well—and as quietly—as it does, especially on a campus dominated by colonial and Georgian architecture. Its copper roof, green cornice, and band of gray brick manage to be distinctive without seeming showy or out of place. Further, the museum, discreetly set back from its neighbors, makes the most of an exceedingly difficult site. Its concrete gateway minimizes the visual chaos that was bound to attend any effort to bridge two such wildly different buildings, and its sturdy brick construction establishes at least some degree of visual coherence in the mélange that faces East Wheelock Street and the Dartmouth Green.

I am not myself terribly impressed with the monumental concrete gate that ushers one into the sculpture courtyard and thence up to the museum entrance; its stark, severely articulated columns seem to me to be too somber for the solid but urbane building they are meant to herald. Furthermore, the gate opens onto the courtyard in a confusing way: I was not the only visitor who had to stop to look around for the front door to the museum after walking through the gate. But it does bring Wilson Hall and the Hopkins Center into a real if somewhat grudging unity, and—what is probably more important in the face of such strong and disparate architectural neighbors—it relieved the architects from the task of having to contrive a public façade for the museum: the Hood huddles quietly behind the gate, showing the street little more than its copper roof and cupola.

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The detailing and workmanship of the Hood are of a very high caliber. The influence of Louis Kahn, with whom Moore studied at Princeton University in the late Fifties, is evident throughout, especially in the generous use of oak and bushhammered concrete. Most of the museum's nine galleries (which together comprise about eleven thousand square feet of exhibition space) are modest and unobtrusive: they are comfortable, well-lighted spaces in which to view art. The Churchill P. Lathrop Gallery on the second floor—in many ways the showpiece of the museum—aspires to something grander and more stately. Its most ingenious feature is a skylight that is partially concealed above a catwalk that runs like a spine across the center of the ceiling; this arrangement allows for controlled natural light and provides a simple and flexible device for hanging lights. In the end, though, this gallery impresses one as being more barnlike than grand; it seems somehow out of scale with the row of smaller galleries that cleverly intersect it on a diagonal. At the same time, it is disrupted by the oversize stairway that opens into it from below along the museum's east wall.

Cleverness, in fact—a too self-conscious attempt to be "interesting"—is the besetting weakness of the Hood's design. There are a few too many unexpected perspectives and playful corners, too many allusive details and "brilliant" solutions to architectural problems. The paint scheme in the entrance vestibule, for example, is gratuitously complicated, and the deliberate references to New England brick industrial architecture seem more coy than appropriate. Thus, although the museum as a whole has a dignified yet unpretentious feel to it, there is an underlying current of architectural trickiness and free play that occasionally distracts one from the works of art the building was designed to display. Nevertheless, I do not mean to diminish Messrs. Moore and Floyd's accomplishment here; by and large, I believe it can be said the Hood Museum is a far more serious and accommodating work of architecture than one had reason to antici-

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pate. It respects but does not ape the buildings that surround it, and it provides an inviting, even elegant, place for the enjoyment of art.

The Hood's success also owes a great deal to its new director, Jacquelynn Baas, and her curatorial staff, who are to be congratulated for the thought and sensitivity that they brought to the installation of the museum's inaugural exhibition. Their efforts gave as much scope and coherence to the show as one could expect given the limitations of Dartmouth's collection. The highlight of that collection, incidentally, is a series of six Assyrian stone reliefs from the ninth century B.C., which the college acquired in the mid-nineteenth century; dramatically hung and lighted in the large first-floor gallery, they have a commanding presence as one enters the main part of the museum.[1]

For the rest, the Hood Museum's holdings, consisting of a wide variety of ethnographic and anthropological objects as well as art works proper, are fairly undistinguished. There are several works by Stella on loan for the opening show, including the well-known *Valparaiso Flesh and Green,* painted when the artist was in residence at Dartmouth, and a massive, irridescently painted construction on etched aluminum, *Shards III* (1983), which measures seventeen feet by fifteen feet and continues Stella's by now familiar explorations of pictorial space. As far as Dartmouth's permanent collection goes, there are a handful of notable works scattered here and there, mostly contemporary or near-contemporary. I found Dubuffet's *Topographie au nid du pierres,* an oil and collage from the late Fifties, a particularly engaging piece. But there is also the usual conglomeration of second- or third-rate works by artists known and unknown: an anemic Vuillard, a clumsy Vlaminck, an unfocused Pissarro, and so on. Recalling Stella's admonition, I couldn't help but wonder whether a good number of the works exhibited had been acquired and displayed more for their names than for their intrinsic aesthetic merits. Thus it was refreshing to discover that Miss Baas, hoping to integrate the museum's offerings as far as possible with the college's art-history and studio-art curricula, intended to give priority to refining rather than expanding the museum's collection.

Throughout the dedication festivities, one was reminded that Dartmouth, no doubt partly because of its isolation, is possessed of a fervent, proprietary affection for alma mater that is rare even among Ivy League institutions. The unclouded praise that the Hood Museum elicited from all quarters reinforced one's appreciation of that fact. Yet while the Dartmouth "family" is justly proud of its new possession, there is something deeply troubling about the *phenomenon* of the Hood Museum and the publicity that surrounded its dedication. For the outsider, at least, both raise serious questions about the nature of Dartmouth's commitment to the educational and cultural tradition it was founded to preserve.

Indeed, the real importance of the dedication of the Hood centers not so much on the virtues or liabilities of the museum itself, but on the significance of the entire event for Dartmouth's avowed role as a steward of the traditional values and standards of a liberal-arts education. These values and standards, it is worth reminding ourselves, have always insisted upon a firm distinction between art and entertainment, between scholarship and journalism, between the academy and the marketplace—in short, they have insisted upon a firm distinction between high culture and popular culture, and have taken the former as their sole legitimate concern and *raison d'être.* At Dartmouth, this venerable tradition is neatly epitomized by the college's motto: *vox clamantis in deserto,* "a

1 Dartmouth's most famous artwork is undoubtedly *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932-1934), a powerful if somewhat melodramatic cycle of frescoes by the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, who was brought to the college in 1932 by the Department of Art. These frescoes reside not at the Hood but across campus on the walls of the reserve reading room at Baker Library.

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voice crying in the wilderness." This edifying tag from the gospel of St. Mark underscores Dartmouth's inherited view of itself as an outpost of culture and a custodian of the values of a traditional, liberal-arts education in an environment largely indifferent to such endeavors.

Unfortunately, the events surrounding the dedication of the Hood Museum force us to question the extent to which Dartmouth's commitment to these traditional ideals remains intact. Of course the president of the college, David T. McLaughlin, assured us in several speeches of the college's continuing allegiance to its heritage. But one had to wonder about the nature of that allegiance. Does Dartmouth's turn to the contemporary art scene for its convocation speaker signify a fulfillment of its traditional educational mandate? Does its turn to the journalistic marketplace for its main lecturer really represent continuity with the cogent standards and values of a liberal-arts education? Haven't these roles traditionally been reserved for distinguished scholars? Or consider its entry into the trendy precincts of postmodernist architecture for its architect, or the blatant celebration of its relation to the ethos of Hollywood movies: are these consistent with an affirmation of the cultural standards to which Dartmouth considers itself heir?

One had to admire the care, thoroughness, and politesse of the public-relations effort that broadcast news of the dedication and orchestrated the spate of events that boosted it. Nevertheless, one must consider the significance of such polished displays of public relations in light of the traditional vocation of a liberal-arts college tucked away in Hanover, New Hampshire. What does it mean that Dartmouth's voice crying in the wilderness has become a clarion, a sophisticated dispenser of press releases and publicity photos? Near the beginning of his classic essay on "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline,"[2] Erwin Panofsky noted that

2 Reprinted in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*; Doubleday, 1955, pp. 3-4.

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the humanist not only "respects tradition" but that he "looks upon it as something real and objective which has to be studied and, if necessary, reinstated." For Panofsky, the visual arts form an integral part of the tradition that the humanist aspires to study and preserve. But what one witnessed at the dedication of the Hood Museum was not at all an affirmation of the arts understood in this traditional, humanistic sense—understood, that is, as the legacy of man's most deeply and subtly felt encounters with the visible world. Rather, one witnessed a celebration of the *prestige* of art, of the patina of culture and refinement that mere association with art—especially the "brand-name," *au courant* art of an established figure like Frank Stella—can impart to an institution with the requisite financial and social resources.

This emphasis on the prestige of art and the tendency to look outside the rigorous confines of its own traditions was nowhere more dramatically evident than in Dartmouth's choice of Paul Goldberger as the main speaker for the dedication. Mr. Goldberger does indeed write voluminously about architecture for *The New York Times.* But his title as "architecture critic" is, alas, something of a misnomer. For among other things, the term "critic" implies the attempt to maintain an attitude of critical independence with respect to one's subject. In this sense, Mr. Goldberger's writings on architecture can be said to bear roughly the same relation to architectural *criticism* as the writings of a political advocate do to political criticism. Their content appears to be determined largely, if not wholly, by an unwavering loyalty to the reputations of a few powerful figures in the world of contemporary architecture.[3] In this context, one thinks particularly of Mr. Goldberger's tireless efforts on behalf of Philip Johnson. Such efforts have not, of course, gone unnoticed. If Mr. Goldberger has labored hard for a chosen few, these few have in turn been instrumental in establishing his own reputation. Nor is this surprising: what better way for these important figures to assure their continued influence than through the architecture critic for *The New York Times*? This process achieved a giddy climax of sorts last year when Mr. Goldberger was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for "distinguished criticism," an award that anyone familiar with Mr. Goldberger's work can only regard as a travesty.

Mr. Goldberger's lecture for the dedication, aptly entitled "Architecture, History, and Confusion," was essentially a brief for the postmodernist or (as he preferred to call it) "Romantic modernist" aesthetic, an aesthetic that champions playfulness in architecture and refuses in principle to distinguish between serious art and popular culture. This crucial dimension of Mr. Goldberger's position was somewhat obscured, however, by his rhetoric. History, he told us, is what is most on architects' minds today. Rejecting the chilly, demanding geometries of modern architecture—perhaps best epitomized by the work of Mies van der Rohe—contemporary architects are engaged in an attempt to recapture a sense of history, ornament, and tradition, an attempt, as Mr. Goldberger put it, "to evoke, literally or interpretively, the architectural forms of the past."

Part of this impulse to recoup history, according to Mr. Goldberger, is a new desire for "permanence" and continuity, a desire that expresses itself variously in the historic preservation movement, the historicizing ornamentation of postmodernist architecture, and the resurgence of interest in

3 Actually, "unwavering" is not quite accurate, either, as Mr. Goldberger's volte-face on Michael Graves's proposed design for expanding the Whitney Museum of Art demonstrates. When the design was made public, late last spring, Mr. Goldberger delivered himself of breathless praise for the scheme. By the end of the summer, however, Mr. Graves's design had aroused sufficient public animosity that the project was clearly in danger. This Mr. Goldberger must have discerned, for at the end of August we were presented with another article on the subject. Now Mr. Goldberger criticized Mr. Graves's proposal, blithely maintaining—with no explanation for his change of heart—more or less the opposite of what he had asserted in the spring.

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more lavish, lasting building materials such as granite and marble. The much-touted celebration of "contextualism," of self-consciously accommodating architecture to the buildings and landscape that surround it, also belongs here. The postmodernist impulse in all its varieties testifies to what for Mr. Goldberger was the main problem with modernism: its failure to create "a sound, workable vernacular," an everyday style that people really feel comfortable with. Postmodernism attempts to remedy this lack by abandoning the "dogmas" and "formulas" that modernism is said to have been enslaved to, plundering the entire inventory of architectural styles in search of pleasing or playful or dramatic forms. As an example of the kind of thing he had in mind, Mr. Goldberger cited Philip Johnson's RepublicBank Center in Houston, accurately describing it as the "only Flemish Renaissance skyscraper in history with a Romanesque face."

There is much that could be said about Mr. Goldberger's presentation. Here I will limit myself to what is most deceptively seductive in it: the false dichotomy he draws between an anti-traditional modernism and a tradition-loving postmodernism. We all hear talk of modernism's "rejection of history," its revolt against tradition, and so forth, all of which was strikingly expressed in the Viennese architect Adolf Loos's insistence that "ornament is crime." But what this leaves out is the extent to which modernism has remained passionately involved in the question of what might constitute a legitimate, *living* tradition in the modern age, a tradition that could affirm the past yet remain faithful to the novel exigencies of a world in which advances in engineering and technology have drastically and ineluctably revamped the process—and the products—of building.

It is of course true that modernist architecture began in part as a reaction against tradition, especially against the tradition of nineteenth-century historicism; but it was primarily because modernism continued to take the question of tradition so seriously that it placed itself in opposition to a tradition that it judged to be spiritually bankrupt. If we must criticize modernism for failing to create a workable vernacular, we must at the same time praise it for having the courage and honesty to face up to the difficulties involved in the task. And the truth is, of course, that postmodernism is no closer to creating a genuine vernacular than was modernism. Nor are its proliferating historical extravagances any more "traditional" than a Miesian glass box; they are simply more arbitrary.

The problem of arbitrariness—which is central, I think, to any serious assessment of the phenomenon of postmodernism—emerged with special clarity in Charles Moore's talk on "The Future of Memory." Moore is a gentle, pacific man who wants his architecture to please and contribute to the tranquility of his clients. His main objection to modernism, he said, was that it was too "macho," too bent on "making statements" and obsessed with originality. He favored a quieter, more relaxed architecture that could freely draw on the past without having to take the past too seriously. Thus he described a large round window that he designed for an Episcopal church in California as "a rose window for high church people who wanted a rose window," but one with rectangular mullions for low church people who were uncomfortable with ecclesiastical ornamentation. Moore's description got a laugh, of course, but it is important to recognize the cavalier approach to tradition that his handling of the church window implies. It underscores the truth of Mr. Goldberger's observation that Moore has done as much as any architect to blur the distinction between high art and popular art. In point of fact, the window in question is *neither* "a rose window for high church people" *nor* a plain mullioned window for the more Protestant in the congregation; playing with and alluding to both, it exhibits an arbitrariness and frivolity that excludes it from *any* genuine tradition.

In the end, perhaps, it is honesty, more than any stylistic device or any social or architectural program, that is the defining

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mark of the modernist movement in architecture. For what really distinguishes modernism from postmodernism is not that one is more "historical" or "traditional" than the other, but that modernism is possessed of a moral seriousness that postmodernism deliberately, gleefully abandons. It is precisely this rejection of seriousness—which means also a rejection of honesty—that endows postmodernism with its playful character and allows it to treat tradition as a more or less neutral storehouse full of stylistic tricks. With this in mind, one can appreciate the appropriateness of the term "Romantic modernism" (or "neo-romanticism," which also enjoys a certain vogue) as a favored synonym for "postmodernism." For the architecture it describes is indeed Romantic, at least in the sense that Nietzsche meant when he criticized Wagner as decadently Romantic, as an actor who trafficked in "poses" and "histrionics." "What he wants is effect and nothing but effect," Nietzsche complained, noting that "What is meant to have the effect of truth must not be true." Postmodernism, too, is addicted to "poses," to "histrionics," to "effect," which helps explain why so many of its creations have a strong element of kitsch or Camp about them.

The postmodernists would have us view modernism as simply one architectural movement among others, a movement that has had its day and is now on the wane. But in its deepest sense, modernism is not a movement but a moral achievement, an achievement that has become an ingredient in any art that aspires to be more than mere entertainment. And while the phenomenon is hardly confined to Dartmouth, what in the end was so dispiriting about the events surrounding the dedication of the Hood Museum was the spectacle of even this distinguished enclave of the liberal-arts tradition being party to an impulse so inimical to the values it was founded to preserve and nurture. The lonely voice crying in the wilderness, alas, has learned to speak in the glittery, insubstantial strains of cultural chic.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Italo Calvino *by James Gardner*
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Renaissance sculpture in Detroit
by Creighton Gilbert
Culture & politics in San Francisco
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"Contrasts of Form" at MOMA *by Jed Perl*
Dave Smith: poet & critic *by Bruce Bawer*
André Kertész *by Hilton Kramer*

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Theater

And all their minds transfigured

by Mimi Kramer

Come now, what masques, what dances shall we have,
To wear away this long age of three hours
Between our aftersupper and bedtime?
—Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Lord, Mr. Dangle, why will you plague me about such nonsense? . . . Isn't it sufficient to make yourself ridiculous by your passion for the theater without continually teasing me to join you?
—Mrs. Dangle, in Sheridan's *The Critic*

Quite recently, I was taken to the ballet —twice, within a brief space of time. The friend who took me to see a performance of the MacMillan *Romeo and Juliet* at American Ballet Theatre goes rather frequently to the ballet herself and knew when she invited me that I had not been to the ballet in years.

Actually, she didn't know the half of it: apart from *Coppelia,* I couldn't remember ever having seen a "story" ballet before. The awful thing was that I didn't know how to read it. It wasn't just a question of vocabulary: I didn't know the rules of the language. All sorts of questions kept worrying me—questions, I knew, that could only occur to someone who'd virtually never been to the ballet in her adult life and was looking at it with a theatrical eye.

What determined the character of a Juliet or a Tybalt, I wanted to know: choreography? production? performance? Could you have, for instance, a sultry Juliet, an ambivalent Tybalt—or were her innocence and his arrogance an integral part of the "text" of the ballet? How about stage business—was that a matter of choreography or "blocking?" Who decided where the rest of the company went or what they were doing when no one was meant to be looking at them—author or director? And how about all those characters who didn't seem to dance at all? Friar Lawrence and Juliet's Nurse: they looked so foolish just standing around! In drama, after all, you would expect a mute character to have some more than purely narrative function; his silence would have to constitute some meaning or have some effect in order for his presence to be justified. Did any such aesthetic obtain in dance as well? What about all that mime? How appropriate a subject for dance, I wondered, could something be that required mime in order to be understood? Or copious program notes, like the ones MacMillan had provided: "Romeo can think only of Juliet, and, as a wedding procession passes, he dreams of the day when he will marry her . . . ." Honestly! If the fellow couldn't use the medium of dance to keep me abreast of what was going on, what on earth was the point?

As the curtain fell on the second act, my friend looked at me kindly: "Do you miss the words?" she asked. I nodded (a little anxiously) and confessed to feeling singularly

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unmoved. I didn't think—I added cautiously—that I quite understood the form. The bare plot, stripped of the details of character and motivation, seemed to reduce the narrative to a series of events: someone fell in love; someone quarreled; someone died. Who cared if you didn't know why! If my friend was scandalized, she certainly didn't let on—in fact, she hardly seemed surprised. Smiling slightly and putting her head to one side, the better to peer at me, "*Well my dear,*" she remarked reasonably, "in *Romeo and Juliet* there's not all that much to dance about, you know!"

I stared. Had I heard correctly? Did I understand my friend to be saying that this whole ballet, this thing we had come to see, had actually been a rather silly idea? If so, she didn't seem at all troubled by the thought. She wasn't angry, didn't seem to feel cheated, duped, taken advantage of. On the contrary, nowhere in her remark had been the suggestion that just because what she said was true she was any the sorrier for having gone to the ballet that evening. Now this, truly, was a new idea! That one could go to see an imperfect work performed and just accept it for what it was, attend a performance of something one did not necessarily consider great—as one might go to hear performed a piece of music that is not a particular favorite—simply because one was part of an audience for an institution that had a certain repertoire. So it wasn't a work of vision—so what? We had seen some beautiful things and had something interesting to think and talk about.

My visit to the ballet made me feel genuinely sorry for theater—both for the form itself and for its practitioners in New York. For there is, of course, no regularly theatergoing audience in New York the way there is an audience for opera, dance, or music here, or the way there is a regularly theatergoing audience in London. That is what all those jeremiads in the press and media last year were about—not "The Death of Broadway" or even the death of theater, but the failure of theater *as an industry,* as a commercial venture. What that failure consists in is the gradual exclusion from Broadway audiences of the casual, intelligent theatergoer, the polarization of the theatergoing public into two groups: the know-alls and the know-nothings. It ought to be possible to attend a performance of John Malkovich's production of *Arms and the Man* at Circle in the Square without either thinking it is good or letting it ruin your week. One ought to be able to go and see the thing for the sheer pleasure of the Shavian rhythms and Kevin Kline's performance and to leave admitting wisely but good-naturedly (like my friend of the ballet) that one had seen a very imperfect production of a very slight work. But it is not possible. Monetary and critical inflation have turned New York theater into an all-or-nothing proposition with the result that there is no longer any middle ground for the audience to inhabit: one can only play the villain or the fool.

What had impressed me about my friend's attitude toward what she had seen that night at the ballet was the perfect marriage it effected between charity and discernment. What that attitude, in turn, relied on was a notion of "the ballet" as something from which one might be expected to derive pleasure or profit—the idea that there was an inherent value in (as it were) simply "going to the dance." If no such audience existed in New York for theater, then clearly it was because theater was not something from which most educated New Yorkers expected to derive much pleasure or profit. And that made me sad.

Another thing that made me feel sorry for theater was an article about theater that appeared some months ago in *The Atlantic* by *New York* magazine's movie critic, David Denby. Inspiring sympathy for theater had not been Denby's aim. His purpose, on the contrary, was to defend the position of the regular non-theatergoer. Using the experience of a season spent going (mostly) to Broadway theater, he strove to explain why there is a certain kind of New Yorker who simply has no use for theater—the intellectual, not to put too fine a point on it. "Typically," wrote Denby, describing this group,

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> they are roughly my age (forty-one) or younger, and they are not completely ignorant. They love Shakespeare, Chekov, late O'Neill, and also Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers & Hart, *Guys and Dolls*; they admire Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and (with misgivings) Brecht; they might admire Molière, too, if one of the plays in Richard Wilbur's translation were given a great production. But the difficult-to-translate Racine, a major figure in world literature, is no more than a name . . . . Their culture—my culture—is books, music, and movies . . . .

As I say, the primary aim of Denby's piece was not to kindle any great love for theater, but it sort of made you want to rush into the street in search of Gerald Schoenfeld and give him a great big kiss: such are the uses of rhetoric.

It was partly that Denby was trying to use Broadway to attack *all* theater—and Broadway is such an easy target, after all. It was partly the idea of criticizing something you don't really care about anyway. It was partly the tone—Denby's pomposity and self-importance—and partly just the nature of his aperçus. For whether he was discussing David Mamet or Marsha Norman, the design of *Heartbreak House* or the design of the Vivian Beaumont, the virtues of British acting or that "major figure in world literature," the "difficult-to-translate Racine," Denby's pronouncements had the unmistakable ring of borrowed wisdom. But the main problem with David Denby's article was its disingenuousness. It wasn't really about the experience of New York theater at all; it was about the experience of being David Denby. Throughout his piece Denby seemed to think he was describing theater in the voice of the "new" journalism—that "you are there with the off-beat recording consciousness" voice that turns reportage into something approaching social criticism.

In fact, though, from beginning to end Denby's recording consciousness—with scarcely a thought to spare for any of the plays or productions he claimed to be sampling—was riveted on himself. Thus, on Peter Brooks's *Carmen*:

> After an hour of this thing . . . I turn away from the stage and look at the audience. A great feeling of unreality comes over me. Everyone presses forward in his seat, all attention, but I cannot suppress evil thoughts: How much of the French dialogue do they understand? Are they really involved, or struggling to *get* involved? From my seat, upstairs and around to the side of Lincoln Center's awkwardly designed Vivian Beaumont Theater, the actors' faces are impossible to see. I long for a close-up . . . . Sleep encloses me, and I dream of Risë Stevens clenching a rose in her teeth.

This is not the refreshing response of an unaccustomed theatergoer to a trendy cultural event. It isn't even a real response. It is the posturing of a man so aware of himself as critic that it is difficult for him to focus even temporarily on anything other than the notebook in his lap.

The trouble is, though, that this sort of criticism won't wash at all for theater. The self-conscious critic may be all right in a movie theater. His notebook may even be an asset to him there. Movies are an all-engulfing experience; they spin fantasies they have no trouble making us believe in. In a movie theater, the self-conscious, assertive mind is probably the hero in the audience: it is he who will remain sufficiently disengaged from the almost dreamlike state that movies induce to have something interesting to say when it's all over. But the self-conscious theater critic is of no use to anyone: he has begged the very question that theater exists to ask: "Can I fool you? Can I make you forget—if even for a moment—that what you are seeing isn't real?" Movies do not ask an audience this question: there is no test, no challenge—credulity is not an issue there. But that is what every performance of every play asks every member of an audience: "Can I—with a little bit of paint and a little light and music, with a few sticks of furniture and a grand pretense of passionate conviction—draw you in? Can I make you forget about the sweat and the saliva and the stage lights that are never really out of your

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range of vision and the rows and rows of heads that reckon up the darkness in the space that separates me and you? Can I transcend the limitations of my nature and your own to the point where you will forget that what you are seeing isn't really happening—that Desdemona died last night and that she will die again tomorrow?" That is the question the theater critic has come along to answer and he must be able to forget about the notebook in his lap. He must find some way to make his scribblings and keep his place almost without knowing he is doing it. Because anything else would be a lie.

David Denby's article left me in a quandary: I didn't know which I wanted more, to see Denby's arguments refuted or to see them ignored. On the whole, I thought I wanted to see them refuted; so it was with some satisfaction that I turned to Robert Brustein's column in *The New Republic* a week or so later to read his reply. Now Brustein, of course, in addition to being the regular theater critic for *The New Republic,* is the artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a representative man-of-the-theater and someone with a regular forum in which to share his ideas with a literate public, it was natural that Robert Brustein would want to respond to Denby's piece. Moreover, it seemed reasonable to suppose that Brustein would want to respond to Denby on a certain level. Denby, after all, was speaking expressly for a literate, urbane public, arguing that theater is something the intelligent man can very well do without; and Brustein has for years been attached to theater in a more or less academic capacity. (From 1966 until 1979, when Harvard invited him to take on the directorship of the new Loeb Drama Center, Brustein ran the Yale Repertory Theatre and the drama program at the university.)

Now Brustein, on his own showing, is no friend to the commercial theater or to its middle-aged, expense-account audience. But this was war: Denby was dismissing not just Broadway but the form of theater itself; and his only forays out beyond the commercial circuit had been to a couple of Sam Shepard plays and an elegantly pretentious performance piece at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to expect Brustein to defend that form, arguing that theater *is* something worth caring about; that it *has* a function and a purpose; that, in fact, it produces a unique phenomenon so intrinsic to the form and processes of theater itself that even the most heavily fur-coated matron attending the most formulaic Broadway musical experiences it.

But perhaps Robert Brustein is not really interested in theater. Or perhaps he is simply more interested in self-aggrandizement and in promoting the American Repertory Theatre. So he used the occasion of Denby's attack on theater (as he has been using his column in *The New Republic* regularly now for quite some time) to hype the reputations of the small coterie of performance *artistes* (and their close associates) whose work forms the bulk of what he produces at the A.R.T. Which was a shame, really, since there were any number of things that Brustein could have done. It might have been more seemly, for instance, had he based his "defense" of theater on the work of institutions other than his own and those of his protégés; for if Broadway does not account for all theater in New York, neither does the peripheral group of avant-garde theater collectives that happen to amuse Brustein at the moment. New York is full of "little" repertory theaters that, like the American Repertory Theatre, are trying to provide a subscription audience and anyone else who may blunder into them with respectable theater at reasonable rates. Not all of them are as well-appointed as Brustein's theater—or as well-endowed—and few of them keep the cutting edge of the avant-garde poised as thrillingly over the vital pulse of American theater as Brustein does; but for all that, their work is not to be despised. Had he so chosen, Brustein might have talked about some of the things these theaters try to do and why their efforts are worthwhile.

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He might, for instance, have described the festival of one-act plays that Ensemble Studio Theatre puts on each year in a ramshackle building on West Fifty-second Street. The E.S.T. one-act-play "marathon" is easily described; it is pretty much the same from year to year; three or four evenings of theater in early summer, each consisting of three or four short plays. At the beginning of each evening a young woman comes out, "explains a little bit" about the upcoming season, and promises to hang around during intermission in case anyone should want to sign up. She points out that the theater has two fire exits; she warns you that few of the plays you see that evening will actually be presented in the order in which they appear in your program. Then she wishes you well and disappears. During the intermission, instead of the usual Broadway fare of overpriced candy and liquor, there are overpriced brownies, coffee, and wine to be had. If you sign up for a whole season and see the festival out you will find, on the whole, that probably only one or two of the plays presented each evening has much merit; out of the whole festival there will probably be only two or three plays that you actually find you can't shake yourself free of; and there will always be two or three (generally one per evening) that make you want to run—screaming—for one of those two fire exits. But there is always *something*—an image, a moment, a characterization—that follows you into the long slow weeks of summer. Which is odd, really, since the stage at E.S.T. is tiny, and from anywhere you sit in the L-shaped house you find yourself facing half the audience. There, at Ensemble Studio Theatre—if anywhere—are the physical limitations of the stage frankly displayed. It might have been nice if Robert Brustein had said something about how and why "little" theaters like E.S.T. transcend their limitations.

There are quite a number of such theaters in Manhattan: the Manhattan Theatre Club, Playwrights Horizon, the Roundabout Theatre, The Second Stage, the Circle Repertory Company, the American Place Theatre, and the Hudson Guild (to name only the most active and visible). They don't all perform the same function or the same kind of theater; they have different audiences and different ideas about their mission here on earth. Some, like Playwrights Horizon, are exclusively interested in launching new work; some, like the Roundabout, exist to revive "forgotten" classics; some, like the Circle Rep, seem interested largely in new American plays; and some, like the Public, like to keep their audiences abreast of recent developments in London or Eastern European theater. Some have very clearly defined objectives: The Second Stage, for instance, exists to give another chance to plays whose time perhaps had not yet come when they were first produced; some don't seem to have any hard and fast rules about their purpose: The Manhattan Theatre Club, for instance, does a little of everything—a new Beth Henley play, the latest Edward Bond, a revival of Christopher Hampton or David Storey, a workshop production of an in-progress musical, a grim new trio by Pinter. Some, like the American Place Theatre, take themselves very seriously and regard their work as a major contribution to world literature and art; others, like the Hudson Guild —perhaps too modestly—just produce plays. But all of them are founded on the same basic principle—that theater is for some reason important to the community—and they all work in pretty much the same way. Most of them maintain at least two stages (and therefore a fairly high level of activity); most of them manage to remain relatively free of the media by drawing their support from a combination of public and private subsidy and the larger part of their audience from a subscription membership. And most of them tend to produce the same mixture of good, bad, and indifferent work. But they are the only places in New York where a healthy theater and an educated, regularly theatergoing audience exist.

Audiences for the E.S.T. one-act-play festival don't spend the intermission wearing a cocktail and a benign smile. Instead, loping down the rickety stairs for a breath of air,

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they can be heard making dismissive remarks about this or that play; but they don't pour out into Fifty-second Street at the end of the evening vowing never to go to the theater again. On the whole, audiences at these little theaters know what to expect. They know that there will be that speech made by a young man or woman (who would probably rather be working in the script department or in casting); they know to expect those two fire exits and that last-minute change in the program; and they know that not everything they get with their overpriced brownie will be a momentous literary achievement or make theatrical history. But they also know that there will always be that image, that moment, that characterization making it somehow worthwhile. It would have been nice if Robert Brustein, as the artistic director of one of the wealthiest and most influential regional repertory theaters in the country, had said a word in defense of what theaters like his all over America are in the business of producing and about why their audiences are not wasting their time. After all, fifty to a hundred dollars is a lot to pay for "an image, a moment, a characterization."

Why should anyone want to bother with theater—at today's prices and in today's cultural climate? Why should anyone want to bother with theater at all? There were any number of ways that Brustein might have tried to answer this question. Denby had argued that the theater's innate phoniness—the degree to which it is capable of representing action realistically—rendered it dramatically ineffectual and therefore useless to the discerning mind. But theater isn't about the realistic representation of action; it never has been. And Brustein might have pointed this out. "Look here, Denby," Brustein might have said, "you're quite right in saying that cinema is the place for representation; right too that theater can never hope to convey any more than a fitful impression of reality. There, after all, is the stage, framing itself like a window on its own limitations. But those limitations," Brustein might have gone on, "are the source not of theater's weakness, but of its strength. For theater, unlike film, does not occur when the audience is involved, absorbed, caught up in the action, but in the very moment that you are complaining about—when the spectator comes to his senses and realizes that what he was so caught up in a moment ago is only a play."

The main difference between the forms of theater and film is a phenomenological one having to do with what is actually happening to the audience while theater is being made. There is a metaphysical aspect to the phenomenon of theater that movies lack entirely. Movies are a linear form, concerned with only one level of reality. But everything on a stage exists on two separate planes, is two things at once: the thing it really is and whatever it is pretending to be. What Hedda Gabler feeds into the stove at the end of Act III is both Lövborg's manuscript and *not* Lövborg's manuscript. The sword that Hamlet exchanges with Laertes is both a blade dipped in poison and *not* a blade dipped in poison. The note that Malvolio builds his foolish dreams upon is both a cleverly penned joke and nothing at all.

Now, when I say that theater is "metaphysical," I use the term in the sense in which we speak of "Metaphysical" poetry, for instance—poetry that is about the ability of something to transcend its own nature, to become two things at once because of some imaginative capacity, some artistic force or energy that someone has exerted on it: a "little room" that can become "an everywhere," a parting that becomes a union because the souls of two lovers are likened to the fixed and treading feet of a compass. Like Metaphysical poetry, theater is about seeing two things at once or one thing in two different ways, which is one reason it takes as its subject conflict, irony, ambiguity, and most particularly the problem of deception—things that are themselves naturally double-edged. Metaphysical poetry draws its transcendent quality from both its aspects: the being and the not-being. The compass without the image of the parting lovers is just an empty figure; and the image of the parting lovers

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without the compass is just a cliché. Just so, in theater, total involvement in the action of the play creates no more than drama—something that issues forth from every television or movie screen. What is unique to theater is the moment when the spectator realizes that the actor has transcended his own nature and limitations, and that—in so doing—he has to a lesser extent allowed the spectator to transcend his own. That was the lie in David Denby's piece: not his preoccupation with the phenomenon of *disillusion* but his suppression of the illusion that usually precedes it.

There is a moment during every performance of every play produced at the Public Theatre when the subway goes by under Lafayette Street. And whenever it does, I look up from wherever I am and realize that it is the Lexington Avenue IRT calling me back to a little room in a vast building in Lower Manhattan. Which presupposes that I had been somewhere else before—in London, in Alaska, on an island beach in the Mediterranean. I know that sound like I know my own name—the sound of the subway going by at the Public Theatre—and yet it never fails to take me by surprise. I smile a little, when I hear it, and mechanically I make a small mark in my notebook; much later, when I see the mark there, I smile again and think, "Next time I must remember to listen for the subway. Next time I won't let Joe Papp catch me out." But he always, always does.

That moment is, I think, what it is theater's function to produce. It actually has very little to do with literature or language, the theatrical moment—Joe Papp and I have very different ideas about what constitutes "a good play"—but it has a lot to do with art, for it produces one of the things it is the function of art to create: a transformation of one's perception of reality and the world. Still, what is its function, this thing I am calling the theatrical moment? For David Denby is still unsatisfied. "Why are you nattering on about subways, and the Public Theatre," Denby wants to know. "I don't

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need to go to the theater to hear a subway going by." It has to do, I think, with something that Theseus says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about passion, poetry, and imagination, all of which, he points out, have the same capacity to transform reality, that is, to misrepresent it. Theseus's point is that "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" are not to be trusted. But Shakespeare's point may be somewhat different.

"And all their minds transfigured so together . . . ." I think the purpose of the theatrical moment is to transform the audience into a crowd of temporary poets like daylilies whose glory comes and goes. What happens to me when I hear the subway going by at the Public Theatre is that I realize that I have transcended the limitations of my real and physical nature and become, however briefly, someone who for a moment was, say, in Bloomsbury as well as in the Public Theatre, or who actually thought Kate Nelligan was Virginia Woolf, as well as that Edna O'Brien had written a superficial play. That moment of realization is accompanied by a rapid succession of very strong and very mixed-up feelings. There is a feeling of admiration—almost awe—for whatever skill has so overcome your reason and senses as to make you forget yourself; there is a kind of envy, too, an identification—not with a character but with the performer. The moviegoer, in his moment of catharsis, identifies with the person the actor is portraying; the theatergoer, in the moment in which he realizes that he's been fooled, tricked, drawn in, identifies with the actor himself—wants to be like him, to have that sort of complete mastery over reality and be able to transform himself and others. It is, at its most primitive and basic level, wishing that one could dance and sing and tap one's toes like Twiggy or Tommy Tune. At it's most sophisticated level, though, it is, if not a religious experience, one that partially explains why the Greeks seem to have connected theater with therapy and religion, and why the theater of Dionysus at Athens was built hard by the temple of Asclepius. For there is a kind of medicine in the grace that permits the one who is not a visionary, who has nothing of the visionary about him, to transcend himself, by means of a process he cannot fully understand.

Of course, the theatrical moment is not always the result of a subway going by. More often, it is the result of theater working. That is the great paradox of theater: that it can only triumph by failing. You cannot gasp in horror at the fate of Lövborg's manuscript without remembering that the papers being destroyed actually have no value at all; you cannot grieve for the inevitable outcome of Hamlet's duel without realizing that the blade is only fatal because somebody has said so; you cannot pity poor Malvolio without realizing that the page that he is chuckling and preening himself over most probably has nothing written on it. Theater can never fully escape its own limitations; but then, it isn't meant to. That is what movies do: deny the limitations of reality, with all the financial and technological resources at man's disposal. Theater is there to transcend the limitations of a small space and a short time, a mean budget and a circumscribed supply of human effort and activity. Theater wants to transcend those limitations and to use them. It is a phasing-in-and-out sort of process that makes the spectator aware that he is being fooled. And good theater is simply theater that produces the indefinable right balance between deceiving you and making you aware that you have been deceived.

Not all theater achieves this balance, of course. Which is why it is not really David Denby's fault that he doesn't know about the subway moment at the Public Theatre. Denby has probably been to the theater more often than I have been to the ballet; but American theater, bred in a tradition of realism—in every respect, from Belasco to method acting—has itself been long in coming to this realization. What is more alarming is that Robert Brustein seems not to be aware of either the function or purpose of theater. The kind of "performance theater" for which he has so much enthusiasm and which he has lately been promoting so

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vociferously in his theater column has nothing to do with producing the theatrical moment. It has no interest in having an effect on the audience at all. A little like David Denby, it is completely absorbed with itself and its own gimmicks. In five hours of Peter Sellars's *Count of Monte Cristo* there is never a single moment when you are unaware of your real and immediate surroundings, never a moment when you are not distracted by the fact that you are watching "a play" and its method of production. Far from being "bad theater," this sort of stuff isn't theater at all!

My friend of the ballet didn't give up on me, by the way. A week or so later she took me to see Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the New York City Ballet. ("We're breaking her in gently," she told a friend she met. "Nothing but Shakespeare to begin with!") If my first visit to the ballet had made me sorry for theater, this one nearly broke my heart; for there seemed scarcely anything the playwright had proposed that the choreographer had been unable to convey, suggest, or comment on. The tedious plot of the two pairs of mismatched lovers, framed by Theseus's royal marriage to Hippolyta and the conflict between Oberon and Titania in the fairy world, lost nothing by being almost flippantly established within the first few minutes by means of a witty dance-mime montage. Who needed words? Balanchine could evoke the sense of a precarious moral order with simply our knowledge of an unruly sprite, lurking unseen behind the structured poetry of Titania's court. Who needed words when a single fairy movement or formation could echo the passage of an unhappy mortal across the stage? Who needed words, when the courtship between Bottom and Titania (which in dialogue can rarely ever rise above the level of comic business) could take on tragic outcomes, when carried on in silence?

Only one thing was, understandably, missing from the original. There is a play that gets produced in Shakespeare's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the one that Peter Quince and Bottom are trying to put together and whose ill-fated rehearsals we have been following in the enchanted wood. A production of the tragedy of "Pyramis and Thisby": in Act V, we see it performed in honor of Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding celebrations. It isn't very good; in fact, it's a disaster. They just can't seem to get that balance right. The writing is bad, the acting incompetent. The playwrights seem to have had no conception of what can and cannot be represented on a stage.

Throughout the play the king and queen are pleased to be wittily contemptuous. Playing the self-conscious critics in the audience, they encourage the rest of their court to follow their example: making clever jokes and snide remarks; interrupting the actors to call out approval or disapprobation; predicting the action of the play. And, what with the actors constantly breaking out of character to talk back to the audience, it's small wonder that the company has trouble drawing the spectators in. "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard," Theseus's intellectual bride sighs wearily at one point; and he more or less agrees. All the same, there comes a moment, late in the play, when Pyramis is lamenting over the death of Thisby. "This passion," Theseus remarks uncomfortably, quite out of the blue, "would go near to make a man look sad." Hippolyta's reply is equally surprising: "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man."

"Beshrew my heart!" Those are strong words. Loosely translated, I think they mean something like "Son of a bitch!"—as in, "I never thought this little company of fools could get to me, but—Son of a Bitch!—I find they have." I think they mean a subway may be going by.

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Art

Dim "Horizons" at the Guggenheim

by Eric Gibson

The practice of undertaking periodic reviews of artistic trends, or of surveying the current scene in general, is widely popular in the art world today. Almost anyone who thinks he's onto something important can arrange an exhibition around his idea. Last winter, for example, Ted Greenwald, owner of a downtown gallery, did just that with two shows entitled "Abstract Implosionism," his name for a diverse body of recent work which, we were to believe, addressed the question of pictorial space in a new and important way. As is so often the case with such endeavors, however, one toured the exhibition feeling no firm connection between the underlying concept and the work intended to illustrate it. Shown in a different context, that same body of work could have been made to prove something entirely different.

Nonetheless, the practice of taking stock has long been institutionalized. In part this is because no self-respecting museum can afford to be thought of as out of touch with—or unsympathetic to—contemporary art. Also, I suspect, it is a way of coping, by means of a sort of pause, with the size and complexity of today's contemporary scene. Then again, in the wake of Clement Greenberg's long career, especially his days as a cultural guru during the Fifties and Sixties, the idea of *making* contemporary art history through highly publicized judgments has exerted a seductive appeal on many critics and curators. By charting the course of contemporary art, it has been thought, one can perhaps determine its direction.

This fall the Guggenheim Museum offered its own selection from the present scene with "New Horizons in American Art," the seventh of its Exxon-sponsored exhibitions of contemporary art.[1] Like the Whitney Museum, the Guggenheim mounts shows of this kind every other year. But whereas the Whitney Biennials—by virtue of their size, spread, and absence of curatorial overview—seem to enjoin the viewer to go and make sense of the spectacle for himself, the Guggenheim's shows are more tailored affairs, consciously attempting to discern a degree of order amid the variety and confusion. This year, as the catalogue acknowledged, the exhibition had a larger imperative as well. Noting that the decade had reached its midpoint, the museum set out to determine the character of current American art and, by implication, to predict a possible future course.

Organized by Lisa Dennison, an assistant curator at the museum, "New Horizons" presented nine artists: Phoebe Adams, Anthony-Peter Górny, Mark Innerst, Tobi Kahn, Mark Kloth, Rex Lau, Joan Nelson, Jim Peters, and Irene Pijoan. They range in age from twenty-two to forty, and in geograph-

1 "New Horizons in American Art" can be seen at the Guggenheim Museum until November 3. An illustrated catalogue, with an essay by Lisa Dennison, is available at the museum bookstore for $15.

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ical origin from the Midwest to the East Coast and West Coast, and even Europe. According to Dennison, they "do not represent an identifiable movement or school," and yet they "achieve a clarity of expression that signals exciting new directions on the ever-changing horizon of American art."

In Dennison's view the artists in the "New Horizons" exhibition are emblematic of the decline of Neo-Expressionism and the ascendance of "other forms of expression: among these, figuration, historicism, appropriation, religious imagery, abstraction and landscape painting." Now, this is at the very least a debatable statement, since Neo-Expressionism is still very much a potent force on the current artistic scene. Unfortunately, neither this statement nor others about the show receive sufficient elaboration in the catalogue essay—nor are they adequately manifest in the work on view. Indeed, at times one feels oneself caught between competing allegiances, so disparate is one's experience of the work and the claims made on its behalf.

In "New Horizons," it is landscape painting that receives the most attention; four of the nine artists—Mark Innerst, Tobi Kahn, Rex Lau, and Joan Nelson—devote themselves to it exclusively. To Dennison this weighting reflects a resurgence of the genre nationwide, the result, she believes, of a return to more traditional forms in the wake of conservative political trends and a new sense of confidence in the nation. In her view, landscape has again become a vehicle for spiritual values: "The themes of the spiritual landscape and human emotional drama that intrigued the painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have a renewed appeal for younger artists."

In fact, the recent resurgence in landscape painting springs more likely from impulses closer to home: from a more direct expression, in today's climate of representation, of the landscape tendencies inherent in Abstract Expressionism, Colorfield painting, and even Minimalism. Even more important, landscape is often seen today as an appropriate "figure" by representational artists who are unhappy with the human image. In any case, it is always risky to explain developments in art in terms of political conditions. Possibly investors, or married couples contemplating children, allow the "state of the country" to influence their choices. But artists rarely do, unless it is to sound a note of dissent. In the midst of the economic boom of the Fifties and Sixties, an earlier period of "resurgence of pride in America," Pop artists were busily satirizing consumerism, media icons, and the very idea of commercial well-being. And today, during a period of increased national self-confidence, there is an abundance of imagery, bad though most of it is, that grows out of opposing tendencies—fear of nuclear annihilation and environmental depredation among them. A meaningful example of this dissident art is Neil Jenney's resonant, unsettling painting of a forest denuded by acid rain. This is a work that speaks of a *contraction* of horizons, in direct opposition to the expansiveness and optimism of which Dennison speaks so glibly.

In my view, the landscapes in "New Horizons" are notable for the absence of any significant measure of transcendence or spirituality. For example, Tobi Kahn's paintings of mountains, shores, and stretches of water are involved less with evocations of nature or higher states of being than with simple pictorial strategies, such as creating tensions between flatness and space, manipulating color for purely optical effect, and so on. His forms are overly generalized and as such, characterless, and they sit in an icy space with which they have no dialogue whatsoever. This extreme generalization is perceived by Dennison to create a deliberate "ambiguity between abstraction and representation," a quality of which she evidently approves. The notion of conscious formal ambiguity derives from the "New Image" painting of the Seventies—painting which attempted to reconcile an isolated image within an abstract structure. New Image painting itself was widely, and often successfully, practiced; but the idea behind it is too often invoked to rescue painting, such as

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Kahn's, which fails to negotiate between two aesthetic poles. Kahn's is not a traditional view of nature cast in a semi-abstract vein so much as lifeless abstract painting trying to constitute itself in the form of orthodox landscape.

The same is true of two other landscape artists in the show, whose abstracting impulses stifle all other aspects of their painting. Rex Lau, striving simultaneously for the visionary and the iconic, so stylizes his forms as to sever contact with the natural world, relegating all feeling to pattern, rhythm, light, and other purely decorative characteristics. In *The Wind Demons,* a painting of two trees whipped by a hurricane, there is no transmutation, no symbolism, no allusion. We are looking at something dangerously close to a cartoon. And Joan Nelson simply reworks tired notions about isolation and desolation in her paintings of anonymous structures receding into a deep space and bathed in a cold, crepuscular light.

The fourth landscape painter in the exhibition, Mark Innerst, is something of a curiosity. His paintings are deceptively straightforward views of forests, seascapes, and the like. Yet Innerst is an "image scavenger," appropriating his subjects from magazines and other popular sources. Thus his landscapes carry an implied critique of the genre itself, a sort of coded irony. They are not representations of landscape so much as paintings about the representation of landscape, commentaries on the ubiquity of certain ready-made images and their questionable power as legitimate vehicles of meaning. His commentary takes the form of coupling and modifying identical views, and intensifying to the point of parody effects of atmosphere. He duplicates the processes of photomechanical reproduction, layering pigment upon pigment, but includes deliberate lapses in order to point up the essential artifice of the image in question.

Curiously, though, only passing attention is given by Dennison to Innerst the appropriator. Instead what is stressed—no doubt due to the many fiery horizons he depicts—is the way the paintings "conjure up mystical and otherworldly associations that make [him] an indisputable heir to the Romantic tradition." Such an interpretation presents Innerst in a novel context, but one that distorts our understanding of who he is. Dennison has taken the sting out of his irony and transformed the subversive Innerst into the docile traditionalist.

"New Horizons" also addresses the popularity of religious—or pseudo-religious—imagery in recent art. Here again, however, an issue is raised without being thoroughly explored either in the catalogue or in the work on view. Jim Peters and Anthony-Peter Górny both embrace religious formats, allusions, and imagery, but in arbitrary and incidental ways.

Jim Peters gives primacy to the human figure and fuses a Balthus-like eroticism with something of Eric Fischl's intimations of domestic unease. Peters's *The Gift*—which depicts a nude man reaching through a stairway railing to grasp the ankle of a nude woman sitting on a bed—is typical: neither figure looks at the other, yet clearly a kind of communication exists between them. When Peters wants to attain a "religious" dimension, he simply adds it—a swooping angel, a suggestive title, a little radiance around a figure. But it is all too detached and dispassionate, and the result is incongruity. If in Tobi Kahn's paintings there is no dialogue between the landscape forms and their ambient space, in Peters's figure paintings there is no connection between the religious and secular components. Górny's work, though somewhat more focused, is likewise not particularly illuminating about the religious component in contemporary art. It adopts only the structures of religious iconography—the altarpiece format, for example—in the interests of presenting an idiosyncratic mishmash of the apocalyptic and the mystical.

In her catalogue essay, Dennison is unclear about the meaning of this "religious" impulse. Although she has no illusions about there being "a compelling religious motivation" behind it, she nonetheless sees

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it as part of a larger "quest for the expression of spirituality in all genres," a position that makes her too ready to accept what she sees at face value. In fact, a quest for spirituality is about the last thing one finds in any of this work, although other themes at times emerge. This summer the Bond Gallery featured, as part of a "Stigmata" show, a three-dimensional Crucifixion scene which included a hermaphrodite Christ. This work clearly had more to do with androgyny than spirituality. Equally unspiritual was the two-dimensional Madonna and Child that appeared about the same time in an East Village gallery—composed, like a jigsaw puzzle, of dozens of tiny fish.

Religion exists to provide us with a moral focus outside ourselves and to account for life's complexities and confusions by offering a larger context in which to view them. Religious art has traditionally existed to manifest religion's mysteries, thus making them more accessible, and to focus the attention of the devout upon the matter at hand, be it the need to lead a righteous life, or simply to pray. None of these characteristics can be said to apply to the religious iconography on view today. Instead, like the current penchant for media imagery, architectural vocabularies, and classical motifs, it functions as yet another foil, one more "text" to appropriate and "deconstruct."

In spite of the missed critical opportunities and exaggerated claims made for what is finally rather ordinary work—or perhaps because of them—there is one aspect of the "New Horizons" show which is, in fact, rather interesting. This is its blandness. It is surprising to find this quality in a contemporary show; nonetheless, there it is. There isn't one striking or powerful work in the entire exhibition. The show has a distinctly sanitized air, a feeling of safe choices having been made during the review process, perhaps out of fear of attracting the kind of response the Whitney receives during Biennial years. In part this is a consequence—unintended, of course—of the enervating familiarity of all of the work, its frank

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derivativeness. Besides the paintings of Tobi Kahn, Rex Lau, Joan Nelson, Jim Peters, and Anthony-Peter Górny, which declare but never overcome stylistic allegiances and affinities, there is Irene Pijoan's painting—at best a warmed-over version of Enzo Cucchi's—and the work of two sculptors, Phoebe Adams and Mark Kloth. Adams's wall-mounted bronzes are no more than hybrids of the stylized, gestural sculpture of Lynda Benglis and the accretions of cast organic forms of Nancy Graves. Kloth attempts to call up powerful, primitive associations of the kind so familiar—and so overworked—in contemporary sculpture. *Marked Entry* consists of four concrete-tipped pipes placed on the floor in a plus-sign configuration, with a large metal circle suspended horizontally from the ceiling above. The work marks a place, to be sure, but like its counterparts in landscape painting, it lacks the spirituality to which it seems to aspire.

But the sense of sanitization comes also from the way in which two potentially controversial issues in the show—media appropriation and religious iconography—have been handled. Both have been blended in with other "forms of expression." Media appropriation, in its token representation, has been annexed to landscape painting, and religious iconography to figure painting—in order, one suspects, to avoid shaking the aesthetic edifice so carefully crafted by the curator. Indeed, the edifice seems to have been Dennison's concern from the start. The art-world predilection for taking stock, and the bureaucratic momentum now behind it, inevitably lead to cases where the tail wags the dog. "New Horizons in American Art" is just such a case. It is long on pronouncements and remarkably short on art of quality or art with any credible relationship to those pronouncements. The result is an edifice—shaky in ways of which the curator is clearly unaware—awaiting inhabitants, a situation identical to that of "Abstract Implosionism" and other exhibitions of that sort. Who would have thought an uptown museum would come to have so much in common with a downtown gallery?

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Michelangelo and the Quattrocento

by James Gardner

That ancient division between classical and romantic art, which has usually served to reveal by which forces works of art are created, or else to describe formal and spiritual dimensions in those works once they exist, might also be invoked, in the case of great art, to characterize the nature of its influence upon succeeding generations. Nowhere in all of art is this more true than in the case of Michelangelo and Raphael, since both men have had an incalculable effect upon posterity, although the nature and basis of their respective influence have differed considerably. To speak in blunt and imperfect generalities, there is a sense in which, if Raphael had never existed, another artist could well have emerged, even if only after several generations, capable of bringing painting to that same perfection of which Raphael has been and will always be the paragon. The idea of progress in art, as a criterion of excellence, was relegated long ago and with good reason to the dustbin of the history of ideas; but, even if this notion will not explain why Raphael is such a great painter, it remains essential to an understanding of his origins and influence. For there can be no doubt that it was he who, by the almost universal consent of those to whom it mattered most, gave the definitive answers to those questions that artists had been asking since the time of Giotto two hundred years earlier. But for this very reason, he is something of a discoverer rather than an inventor, who went further along the common path than any others had done, attaining to heights which his predecessors apprehended perfectly, but which they could not achieve through their own unaided powers. In the natural order of art he is like the noonday sun, whose height and brightness has been determined from the earlier hours of the same day.

If, by contrast, Michelangelo had never been, we should have no right to expect that the highly idiosyncratic manner that he imposed upon painting would have evolved through any other agency. For he invented something that without him not only would never have been, but which in addition was so much the extension of his own massive personality that we could never even rue his absence, because without the precedent that he himself gave, he would be, quite simply, inconceivable. To extend the astronomical metaphor, Michelangelo is the meteor by which a planet is dislodged forever from its native orbit, and is forced to enter another one to which it will become so accustomed that in time this secondary orbit will seem part of the planet's essential nature, but only after the landscape, with all its flora and fauna, has been compelled to undergo a comprehensive series of modifications. There is nothing "necessary," then, in the art of Michelangelo, but his impact was so powerful that if he had not been, it is not too great an exaggeration to say that perhaps every painting before that categorical divide that marks the inception of Romanticism would

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have been in some way genetically different from what it was, rather in the way that a slightly different atmosphere encircling the planet Earth, in not requiring photosynthesis, might have left everything else intact, removing from the landscape only the single color green. Viewed from the other extreme, if the shock of Michelangelo's genius had not encountered another and equal genius to absorb it, through the providential simultaneity of Raphael, then the most characteristic artists of the Cinquecento would have been painters like Francesco Salviati, Jacopino del Conte and Vasari, who, though gifted in varying degrees, are seen as existing on the peripheries if Raphael is seen as the center.

If one accepts this notion of Michelangelo's influence as being constituted in an eccentric energy, rather than following from that natural impulse that forces into the light the flower implicit in the seed, then it would be necessary to reject the question posed in an exhibition this summer at the Casa Buonarroti in Florence,[1] in which the curator, Carlo Sisi, cast about in the Quattrocento for predecessors to the Michelangelesque idiom, or at least for those elements in Michelangelo that derive from earlier artists rather than being entirely his own. The aesthetic pleasure of the exhibition was dramatically qualified by the paucity of original works, most being represented in reproductions around the few, generally inferior, originals that the Casa Buonarroti itself possesses. The answer provided for the question of Michelangelo's roots was ultimately unsatisfactory, either accentuating the obvious or trying to evolve a thesis out of any adventitious similarity between two works of art. In justice to the curator, it is probable that the question permitted of no satisfactory answer in so far as it sought some genetic link between Michelangelo and his Quattrocento predecessors. And only if the goal of the exhibit was simply to point up a few passing similarities, could it be accounted a success of a very minor sort.

The principal problem in Sisi's method, quite aside from the assertion of connections where none existed, or the neglect of those that actually were present, was that he seemed unwilling to accept that what was most truly and essentially Michelangelesque had no precedent in the Quattrocento, being largely the extravagant flowering of a single eccentric imagination, nourished, to be sure, by those treasures of classical statuary that just then were being exhumed from the Italian soil. But it is true that there was a time in the life of Buonarroti, when he was a very young man just entering the studio of Domenico Ghirlandaio and not yet the "divine" Michelangelo of immortal renown, when he was still very much the creature of those final decades of the Quattrocento in which he lived out his youth, and in which he revealed in the most obvious terms, if not an indebtedness to the past, at least an academic interest in it. Among his earliest surviving works are drawings based upon the frescoes of Masaccio in the Brancacci chapel, and of Giotto in Santa Croce. Vasari, who is really the pamphleteer of Michelangelism, is ever in a hurry to discern even in these earliest efforts the unmistakable portents, if not the premature realization, of that greatness which only several years later would be beyond controversion. Could it have been these drawings that forced Ghirlandaio, as Vasari relates, to acknowledge the superiority of the adolescent Michelangelo? In his early drawing based upon Giotto's *Ascension of St. John the Evangelist,* there is evident the studious if not yet entirely skillful reproduction of Ghirlandaio's typical combination of minute cross-hatchings and voids. It was central to Vasari's polemical advocacy of Michelangelo that he should see Ghirlandaio as merely a stepping-stone to his master's ultimate greatness. But this aggrandizement of Michelangelo was accomplished only after violence had been done to the

1 "Michelangelo e i maestri del Quattrocento" is on view at the Casa Buonarroti from June 20 to November 20. The exhibition was organized by Carlo Sisi with the collaboration of Enrico Colle and Mario Scalini.

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reputation of Ghirlandaio, who, it is worth emphasizing, is a far greater artist than is generally realized, in virtue neither of originality nor superficial charm nor anything other than the simple but indisputable fact of his mastery of almost any subject that was of concern to an artist living in the final quarter of the fifteenth century. This drawing by Michelangelo is not an exceptional achievement even for a youth of about fifteen, and while it undertakes to translate into late Quattrocento terms the beautiful cylindrical massiveness of the original, its sense of volume is far less compelling than that of Giotto's creation. The principal interest of this drawing, in retrospect, is in the face of the figure in the foreground, which reveals in a very advanced degree that striving for distinctive and absolute classical beauty that would haunt Michelangelo throughout his life. Already it reveals an unmistakable kinship with David, Adam, and the Christ of the *Last Judgment.*

Similarly, Michelangelo renders into the terms of Ghirlandaio's cross-hatchings and voids Masaccio's depiction of St. Paul handing over a coin; and elsewhere, using the new chalk technique developed by Leonardo, he copies the figures of the same artist's *Adam and Eve Expelled from Eden.* That he should have studied so closely these works of the earlier Florentine masters is not in itself very significant, nor does it represent a necessarily independent interest, since these figures were, even in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, more or less the stock-in-trade of the aspiring artist. Michelangelo's rendition of the familiar scene in no way seeks to improve upon the original through the intervention of any bumptious late Quattrocento know-how, but reveals rather a reverence for Masaccio's creation. The musculature is already recognizably that of Michelangelo of the Sistine Ceiling, yet for all the potential of the chalk medium to suggest a breathing vitality, he had achieved more memorable results in the older style of Ghirlandaio. But seen from the perspective of history, there is something momentous in this drawing, since it pays homage to that

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precise instant in the art of the Renaissance, 1425, when Masaccio first framed the question about the depiction of motion for which Michelangelo would provide the definitive answer almost a century later. Absolute statements are always dangerous in application to the history of art, but if Masaccio in the scene of the Expulsion is not the first modern painter to incorporate into two dimensions the lessons of classical statuary, he is at least the first to make memorable use of them. Through a startling and brilliant transmutation, of the sort called by Aby Warburg an "energetische Inversion," Masaccio has modeled Eve upon that monument of Hellenistic voluptuousness, the *Venus Pudica.* And while the poses are almost identical, the coy concealment of the antique goddess is transformed into a shame and revulsion unknown to the Classical world, a definitive evocation of the central moment in the Judaeo-Christian universe. From the stationary *Venus Pudica,* Masaccio had learned the trick of motion, but nowhere in his surviving art would he again seek it with the same appetite.

Certain writers on the history of science have speculated that it was within the competence of ancient technology to achieve many of the advances that in fact would be made only at the time of the Industrial Revolution. The ancient world failed to arrive at these discoveries, it has been argued, because they would have constituted a destabilizing element in the static societies of that age, and also because there were slaves to do the work just as efficiently. Masaccio, as I said, discovered the trick of motion, but what his contemporaries and immediate successors found remarkable in his creations were such things as human scale, atmospheric perspective, and compelling suggestions of volume. Fra Angelico, painting some five years after Masaccio, reverts, in his depiction of the Expulsion, to the same imperturbable stasis that reigned before Masaccio, and nobody else would begin to reveal the same interest in motion until at least another half century had passed. The truth of the matter is simply this, that the most important contribution that Michelangelo made to the arts of painting and sculpture, that sense of living things impelled through space through an internal and irrepressible dynamism, might in some other form have been achieved at a much earlier date, if only motion had been a desideratum of the artists of the Quattrocento. Because two sovereign geniuses, Leonardo and more essentially Michelangelo, felt the overwhelming impulse to set their creations reeling into inebriate motion, all the art of the Old Masters tradition that came after them could not conceive of a visual world without movement.

Even today, in looking back upon the high Renaissance, we are compelled to feel that Michelangelo's discovery of movement followed of some invincible necessity, of which he was the admittedly problematic minister here on earth. Yet it may be closer to the truth that this movement of Michelangelo's was an eccentricity which caught on, an idea "whose time had come." It may be that it took someone of Michelangelo's stature to "sell" painters and sculptors on the idea of movement, and that a similar interest present in lesser artists (and there were such, as will be seen) would have left subsequent painting in an alliance of Quattrocento stasis and Leonardesque interest in anatomy; in other words, Giorgione would be the representative artist of the Cinquecento and perhaps for hundreds of years thereafter. Of course it is probable that other forces might have intervened to reintroduce movement more gradually later on, or that the forces that influenced painting thereafter would have done so in a different way. But the truth remains that movement was in no way a necessary part of painting. The greatness of Michelangelo was not to discover movement; it was his greatness, rather, that made this trick or quirk seem indispensable.

Before the advent of Michelangelo the static figure reigned supreme, a fact most demonstrably evident in the works of Piero della Francesca. Whenever movement is called for and indispensable, as in Piero's

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Death of Cosroes in Arezzo, the legs and arms are raised and posed variously, in an extremely artificial fashion, as though stasis had assumed another form through which we are seeing a frozen vestige of what had once been movement. The frontality of the actors is at all times faithfully preserved, and is qualified by no suggestion of torsion. This solution is clearly unsatisfactory, but only if convincing motion is a thing explicitly sought, which was not the case at this time. Other artists like Paolo Uccello, whose three panels of the *Battle of San Romano* recall Piero's painting, create an undeniable and exhilarating sense of motion, but it is a movement of abstract patterns, created by the rich interplay of armor and lances and rearing horses which in themselves are all willfully two-dimensional, rather than by any sensitivity to the dynamic potential inherent in a human body.

Human movement is more expressive than that of any of the other animals, because, in addition to its being more deliberate, more complex, and more various, it also finds in the nude a full exposure in all its subtlety that allows for none of the concealment of musculature so neatly accomplished by the hides of the other mammals. In the art of the Renaissance, the progress of the rendering of movement goes hand in hand with the study of musculature, and thus it is no coincidence that Michelangelo's three most important predecessors in the quest for motion were the three most conscientious anatomists of the Quattrocento, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Luca Signorelli, and Leonardo da Vinci. Even if the figures of Pollaiuolo still seem to be in a determinedly experimental stage, characterized by an inability to abandon just yet that safe stasis of the fifteenth century, nevertheless they move with a greater vitality than we have seen before. In certain early drawings included in the show in the Casa Buonarroti, Michelangelo has carefully recorded some of the older artist's experiments, although he ultimately found these solutions unsatisfactory, since he did not use any of them in his finished works. For Pollaiuolo, the effective suggestion of movement derives from the creation of a variety of motives of dynamism, each representing a specific disposition of the human body. But this desultory pluralism must surely have dissatisfied Michelangelo, who rendered the human figure in innumerable different moments within that single and unceasing motility which is for him the quintessential fact of physical life.

That he found much to admire in the works of Signorelli was also made apparent in the Casa Buonarroti exhibition, for Signorelli presents that more continuous sense of movement that Pollaiuolo lacked, and there is surely a greater diversity in the stances that his figures assume. It is from this Tuscan artist, as Sisi makes clear, that Michelangelo would take inspiration for the *Doni Tondo* in the Uffizzi, even in the figures in the background which, of incalculable importance for the future Mannerist movement, actually have their origin in the background of one of these tondos by Signorelli. Another inspiration for the same figures are Signorelli's frescoes at Orvieto, 1499-1503, which are probably the most ambitious figurative program prior to the Sistine Ceiling. It is vitally important that perhaps the only figure in that latter work to be based directly upon a Quattrocento predecessor, the man hauling the ram in the *Sacrifice of Noah,* derives from one of the figures in Signorelli's depiction of the Damned at Orvieto. But despite the obvious merits of Signorelli's dynamism, his figures have something unnatural in that curious faceting technique which is the only way in which he is able to depict anatomy.

In opposition to this faceting, Michelangelo was seeking in these early years a fluent and continuous interlocking of planes, such as sculptors had always known about, as well as plausible renderings of anatomy that might eschew the slightly pedantic and less than vital precision of Signorelli. This final component of Michelangelesque motion he would have discovered in the paintings of Leonardo, from whom he would also learn how to endow each figure with a kind of *élan vital,* surging in a sustained

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wave through all the levels of musculature. Sisi correctly connects a drawing by Michelangelo of the Madonna and Child and St. Anne with a similar sketch by Leonardo, yet he fails to appreciate that this same formulation would provide the inspiration for the *Pietà* in the Vatican, and also for the Entombment in the National Gallery, London.

But in the evocation of motion there was one sense in which Leonardo surpassed Michelangelo: not only do his individual figures move as freely as do those of Michelangelo, but in addition he imparts to a group of figures, as in the various Virgins of the Rocks, a single unified movement that engulfs and is constituted in the cooperation of each of the figurative components. The classical expression of this opposition is to be found in the cartoons that the two artists prepared for the Palazzo Vecchio in 1504. In his *Battle of Anghiari,* as in the *Last Supper,* Leonardo has generated so thorough a continuum of movement among the figures that each of them would be meaningless in itself and becomes significant only when it is understood as a part of that larger organism that evolves whenever two or more living things enter into community with one another.

It is Michelangelo's answer to this work, the *Battle of Cascina,* more than the Sistine Ceiling, that marks the real beginning and dramatic statement of his notions of movement. In application to this work, S. J. Freedberg makes the point that it was the sculptor in Michelangelo that disdained to fuse all the components into a single dynamic entity, preferring rather that each element remain carefully studied in its own right and fully autonomous, linked by only a fairly commonplace composition. And while it should be remembered that in his later works, even after allowances are made for his celebrated inability to finish what he started, it was in fact Michelangelo who first brought to sculpture that dynamic unity with which Leonardo had instilled painting, still in this earlier work he groups his figures much as a sculptor would, using the two-dimensional medium to create a program more ambitious than could ever be realized in the round. It is worth considering in this context that perhaps the sculptor and painter in Michelangelo inspired one another reciprocally, and that despite his legendary distaste for painting, he was tempted by the thought that he could achieve more ambitious sculptural results in this latter medium. It was the desire to reclaim for painting as much of the inherent three-dimensionality of sculpture that induced him, through the depiction of movement, to dissolve the traditional and limited vocabulary of angles given to earlier painters—the frontal, profile, and three-quarter view—into that infinitude of angles which, in geometry, constitutes the theoretical foundation of curvature.

Already in the cartoon for the *Battle of Cascina* we find the beginnings of that army of variously posed figures who will be added to and rendered definitive on the walls of the Sistine and Pauline chapels, and who will thence proceed into unnumbered creative efforts of visual art right down to the end of the eighteenth century. And yet, with the exception of those figures that find their way into the works of the self-professed acolytes of Michelangelo, like Daniele da Volterra and Jacopino del Conte, the majority of the figurative progeny of Michelangelo will not look like their first fathers. It was, as I wrote earlier, the miraculous contemporaneity of Raphael that wholly assimilated and transformed the visions of Michelangelo from what had been in a certain sense alien to human understanding into something essentially human. Without wishing to suggest any precedence of one genius to another, it might be said that Raphael is Aaron to the Moses of Michelangelo. This might be put another way: in his beautiful essay on Michelangelo, Walter Pater purports to find in the master's poetry a kind of sweetness which emerges out of the awful power that he more habitually displayed in his creations in the visual arts. There is something of undeniable nobility in this notion, as though it were as important to Pater that a great human being comprise within himself all the

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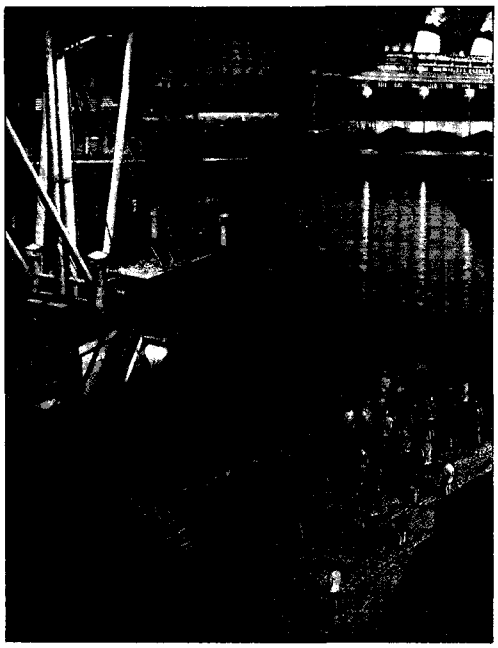
disparate modalities of the species as it was to Michelangelo that all figures should aspire to be understood only in the round. But in reading the knarled Tuscan idiom of Michelangelo, I find only a confirmation of the rocky massiveness of his paintings, sculptures, and architecture. Rather it is the more stable temperament of Raphael that modifies and renders conceivable those sublime monstrosities of Michelangelo. Raphael is the necessary extension into human terms of the willful contingency of the man from whom he learned so much, or stole so much, as Michelangelo himself believed. It is only when Raphael is considered in indissoluble jointure with Michelangelo that we can reapply with greater justice the memorable phrase that Pater applied only to the older artist: *ex forti dulcedo,* out of strength came forth sweetness.



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Books

What is "humanism"?

by James W. Tuttleton

Last year Congress passed a funding bill (the Education for Economic Security Act of 1984) containing a clause prohibiting the use of federal money, in "magnet" schools, for any course of instruction that local education authorities deemed to reflect the values of "secular humanism." In its infinite wisdom, Congress did not see fit to define this term. But some local school boards have found a lexical authority in a 1961 Supreme Court decision written by Hugo L. Black. According to Justice Black, secular humanism is "among the religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God." Like many of the Court's loose definitions, this one is sufficiently broad to have encouraged some opponents of secular humanism to identify it with moral relativism, sexual permissiveness, and abortion; birth-control and drug-abuse programs in the schools; and the teaching of evolution, worldwide socialism, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Clearly the term covers a multitude of sins in the conservative's decalogue. Is there any way of discriminating, more precisely, what is meant by the term?

The recent intellectual biography *Irving Babbitt,* by Thomas R. Nevin,[1] may be of some assistance in the present political clamor. For Irving Babbitt is perhaps the most well-known American humanist of the twentieth century. Principally remembered as the central figure in the "New Humanist" group that flourished in the Twenties and Thirties (a loose association of critics and intellectuals that included Paul Elmer More, Stuart Sherman, Gorham Munson, and Norman Foerster), Babbitt would have been appalled at the meanings now attached to the term by which his contemporaries knew him. In the present context, then, Nevin's "intellectual study" comes at a timely moment. It encourages us to rethink the meaning of secular humanism, and it offers an opportunity for a fresh consideration of a thinker for whom it offered an adequate system of values.

A professor of French and Comparative Literature at Harvard between 1894 and 1933, Babbitt is most fully present in a handful of incisive polemical books that shaped his reputation as one of the most learned and formidable intellects of his time: *Literature and the American College* (1908), *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* (1912), *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919), *Democracy and Leadership* (1924), and *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (1932). These works reflect an erudite Tory mind unashamedly out of step with the prevailing attitudes of his time. In blunt prose and often acidulous argument, Babbitt set himself against the two major defects of modern culture—scientific positivism and

1 *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* by Thomas R. Nevin; The University of North Carolina Press, 194 pages, $20.

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the woolly-minded "humanitarianism" of the era.

His case against scientific positivism was grounded on its fallacious assumption that the *libido sciendi,* or "passion for knowledge as gathered data," could in any serious sense make for the "progress" of the human race. For him, from the Renaissance onward, scientific positivism had in fact weakened the very foundation of culture. The sacrifice of those age-old values on which civilization had securely rested for centuries—personal liberty, moral responsibility, and social duty —in the name of "scientific materialism" (with its compulsive attention to "data" and its belief in deterministic theories of causation was to Babbitt an abomination. Even more appalling, however, were the noxious effects in modern life of what he called "humanitarianism." By this term Babbitt meant "a passion for feeling at the expense of self-discipline and restraint," as Nevin correctly defines it, an adulation of instinct that leads to subjective morality and, in Arnold's condemnatory phrase, "doing as one likes."

On the level of culture and politics, the scientific positivism of Babbitt's time translated most directly into sentimental notions of social democracy, according to which political control was to be vested in the masses—however unfit, by lack of education, the masses might be. As he observed in *Democracy and Leadership,* "The notion in particular that a substitute for leadership may be found in numerical majorities that are supposed to reflect the 'general will' is only a pernicious conceit. In the long run democracy will be judged, no less than other forms of government, by the quality of its leaders, a quality that will depend in turn on the quality of their vision." Babbitt was the true heir of Emerson in his preoccupation with "the perfecting of the individual" rather than with what he called in *Literature and the American College* "schemes for the elevation of mankind." Any collectivization of the individual will essentially negated the continuous task of self-education and self-mastery, and Babbitt spurned the Marxist tendencies of his time as the latest form of political romanticism. For him, the forms of social evil were not due to the private ownership of property but to flaws in private character which it is the task of education to eradicate. In this he took his text from Aristotle in the *Politics,* who observes that "Regulations about property are no substitute for the training of character and intellect or for using the laws and customs of the community to that end." Education in a democracy —especially education for leadership—therefore played a decisive role in Babbitt's thought. And he was a severe critic of American colleges, especially Harvard, with its elective system that had produced, in his view, "curricular utilitarianism."

Although he was a lifelong professor of French literature, Babbitt was remorseless in calling French "a cheap and nasty substitute for Latin." Latin as a language was the magisterial medium that had transmitted the classical values of the past. He found in French literature, especially in the modern era, an "intellectual lightness," a valueless impressionism, a thirst for sensation, and a moral decadence that had infected much of Western culture. For Babbitt, Rousseau was the paradigmatic figure, the symptom of our cultural illness, and he remarked how "at bottom the French are right in perceiving how much in modern life is involved in one's attitude toward Rousseau; they are right in centering their attack and defense on the great father of radicalism, instead of fixing their attempt on some contemporary radical, who is usually only his remote and degenerate posterity."

At the heart of *Rousseau and Romanticism* is an attack on Rousseau's belief in "natural goodness," his glorification of instinct and impulse, his spurious claims for nature and freedom, and his condemnation of society for "corrupting" and "enchaining" the self. Babbitt demolished there Rousseau's hostility to rational thought (as reflected in Rousseau's observation that "the man who thinks is a depraved animal"), and he refuted Rousseau's attempt

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to make society the "universal scapegoat" for individual ills, while exposing his utopian illusions and dissecting the tendency in Rousseau's thought toward a totalitarian religion of the State.

In opposition to such notions, Babbitt argued for a "positive, modern, critical humanism" intended to educate men in the virtues of sane moral realism. He did not scruple to invoke the phrase "the wisdom of the ages" in defining an order of accumulated civilized values in which the moral will, self-discipline, equanimity of mind, an aversion to passional extremes, and balanced action were central. Moving outward from the *Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, Babbitt called for serious intellectual engagement with the value systems of Christ, Buddha, Confucius, and other great minds of the past for whom the individual ethical will—as master of intellect and feeling—offered the key to personal and social well-being. While valuing tradition, Babbitt rejected mindless adherence to sclerotic rules, invoking instead right-minded standards of taste and judgment and the wise observance of convention and decorum.

The touchstone of his thought involved the idea of "a correct scale of values" arising from "the principle of control on which the inner life finally depends." This principle of the "inner check"—what he called the law of measure, of balance, of moderation, and of restraint—was intrinsic in our moral nature as a law of our being, one confirmed by age-old human experience. This willed negation of instinct, in a proper educational environment, could finally produce what he called in *Democracy and Leadership* "the unit to which all things must finally be referred." That unit was "not the State or humanity or any other abstraction, but the man of character."

Is there such a man? Does he exist anywhere? Has he risen anywhere in the modern world to political power? The Moral Majority may very well ask whether any kind of humanism is an adequate guide to conduct. Is man the measure of anything—in the age of the Holocaust, the gulag, and revolutionary terrorism? To the religious mind, Babbitt's humanism ultimately fails because it lacks the foundation for morals offered by revealed religions. T. S. Eliot, Babbitt's admiring student at Harvard and later a convert to Anglo-Catholicism, put the case most tellingly in "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" (1927) and "Second Thoughts About Humanism" (1928). For Eliot, Babbitt's humanism was *ancilla theologiae,* derivative from the ethical wisdom of religion and dependent on it in its claims for the moral will. Humanism, for Eliot, could be of value only for a few rare individuals whose culture had already been shaped by the moral traditions founded on religious belief. While religion might be a foundation of civilization, humanism itself could never be.

Babbitt, however, was incapable of belief in supernatural revelation. "Even if one dispenses with absolutes," he observed in *On Being Creative,* "one may still retain standards." And he perfectly understood how religious values, corrupted by fanaticism, can result in political horrors. But of authentic religious impulses, Babbitt was respectful; and recognizing the aridity of sheer rationalism, he claimed religion as an ally in supporting those humanistic cultural values for which he stood. And in fact, toward the end of his life, he turned more and more toward Buddhism as a religion offering a sufficient satisfaction of those human needs that dry rationalism could not fulfill. Babbitt even translated the *Dhammapada* (posthumously published in 1936) in order to make more widely accessible those moral precepts of Buddha that lead to the Path of Virtue. He believed that the way of Buddha —supplemented by the ethical and social insights of minds like Aristotle, Confucius, and Mencius—offered empirical evidence of the possibility of arriving at "present blessedness" by the exercise of the human will alone.

For most Anglo-Americans, however, Babbitt's quasi-religious humanistic Buddhism was too exotic, and Babbitt's unre-

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mitting emphasis on the unaided self seemed too isolating. Many of those to whom Babbitt had felt intellectually allied turned to other solutions: Brunetière converted to Catholicism; Eliot converted to the Church of England; and even Babbitt's New Humanist protégé Paul Elmer More turned toward Anglicanism.

In the end, Nevin is right to see Babbitt as a tragic thinker for whom the attainment of inner peace involved a continuous struggle against human imperfections, against the self's tendency toward extremes of impulse and feeling, a struggle unrelieved by "any outer agency, human or divine." Though Nevin is rarely in sufficient sympathy with his subject, and overemphasizes both the Platonic and Buddhist elements of Babbitt's thought, we have here an impressive and challenging analysis of an American critical mind that just fails of attaining the first order.

Despite his impressive scholarship and incisive intelligence, Babbitt was too much inclined to devalue the virtues of a democratic politics; and, in his literary criticism, purely aesthetic values are too often subordinated to the moral argument. Still, such a mind is of immense value to politics and art in a democratic state. Babbitt reminds us that the purpose of education is to train character in the exercise of one's social and moral duty and that, to the extent that education succeeds, our public life is more humane and our art a more wholesome expression of the imaginative life. Religious minds, who often associate "secular humanism" with immorality, would do well to commend Babbitt's kind of humanism, for it offers intellectual support—well grounded on the ethical experience of humanity—for those very elements in civilization most worth defending. Babbitt's insistence in *Literature and the American College* that man "must do at least inner obeisance to something higher than his ordinary self, whether he calls this something God, or, like the man of the Far East, calls it his higher Self, or simply the Law," expresses the wisdom of the ages.

Degas laid bare

Roy McMullen Degas: His Life, Times, and Work. Houghton Mifflin, 517 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Eugenia Parry Janis

Biography is simpler than analysis. About what interests us most, it tells us absolutely nothing. Less still!
—Paul Valéry

He loved the smell of burned toast. He even threw bread into the fireplace for the sheer pleasure of inhaling the fumes. In the 1860s he ordered his cider from Normandy a hundred and ten liters at a time, owned shares in the Indiana Southern American Railway, and occupied a ground-floor box at the Opéra. He collected canes and handkerchiefs with as much discernment as he collected pictures. A denizen of Paris's Ninth Arrondissement for practically a lifetime, he was a familiar figure, in his salt-and-pepper tweed suit, by the 1880s. His perfect recall for the peculiarities of speech and gesture culminated in feats of mime and storytelling that made him a sought-after dinner guest, despite a deplorable disposition; during one period he dined at a different house nearly every night of the week. When he told a joke, he gave his performance a strange little twist by immediately extending his hand to each laughing friend like a victorious impresario, "dites quoi?" being his inevitable punctuation mark.

Increasingly as he grew older, he entertained at home, subjecting his visitors to a décor of dust-laden Louis-Philippe, and to the waterlogged macaroni and shredded marmalade of his housekeeper, Zoé Closier. He weighed a hundred and forty-two pounds. Although he instructed his servant to keep the world at bay, he was perfectly capable of receiving a young caller naked except for a chemise.

The prospect of marriage was terrifying to him, to judge by the strength of his ridicule, but more than once he cast a wistful

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eye on the alliance, and even considered dying his hair to attract a young wife. As far as his friends could tell, he hadn't had sexual relations with anyone in decades, if ever. He failed to seduce one of Zoé's predecessors, the pretty Clotilde, who reviled him for not attempting it. Despite her excellent cooking, he dismissed her. The question of his potency was discussed as frequently as his confounding irritability. It even made its way into Van Gogh's correspondence, Vincent insisting with elaborate Christian charity to Émile Bernard that this was a necessary celibacy, calculated to be in contradistinction to the masculinity of his art.

The subject is Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917), a "formidable enigma" and the focus of Roy McMullen's impressively researched and immensely enjoyable biography, the first on the artist. It was Degas's wish to be "illustrious and unknown." His position as one of the greatest artists of the nineteenth century is assured by the beauty and versatility of his drawing, his startling interpretations of color, the expressive modernity of his subject matter—which still offers fresh insights into contemporary human character—and the grandeur of his obsessive technical experimentalism. And now our knowledge of Degas's personality is assured as well, thanks to his biographer's flair and tenacity.

Although Degas would have loathed such inquisitiveness, as Mr. McMullen cheerfully acknowledges, a biography of him for the general reader, which seeks to clear up the "wonder and bafflement" the artist has been "provoking" for over a century, fills a great need. Despite a vigorous and continually emerging literature on Degas's art, even the most assiduous of Degas scholars know him only fragmentarily. It was Mr. McMullen's aim to do something about the accumulation of "facts" around Degas. It seemed strange to him that with so much information the artist had remained mysterious.

Perhaps it is not so strange. Until recently, biography, often one of the more primitive forms of art appreciation, has been deemed secondary in art historical terms—even dispensable, something to be handed over to the drone writers of dictionaries or to cataloguers. The reasons for this are too complex to examine here, except to suggest that art historical biography has been regarded as not sufficiently critical. The long dominance of formalism—with its theoretical disdain for memory or anything not strictly perceivable within the boundaries of the work of art directly before the viewer—may have discouraged the effort that serious biography requires, especially the attempt to integrate the work with the messiness of life.

The insistence of connoisseurs on the primacy of the work of art as a physical thing has served researches into Degas's technique rather well. The latest example of this approach is the Boston Museum's *Edgar Degas: The Painter as Printmaker,* which analyzes every state and variant of Degas's etchings and lithographs with meticulous care. But such books give us no conception of the man, except the suspicion that, slave as he was to the studio, Degas perhaps had not much time for a life, that he saved his caresses for copper plates or the silky flesh of Bavarian limestone.

When Mr. McMullen announces at the outset that he is going "beyond the usual concerns of art scholarship," he seems to suggest that perhaps certain kinds of art history have not been historical enough. Mr. McMullen is not a professional art historian—he is rather a professional writer on art for magazines used to addressing a large and broad reading public, and he has worked as a fine-arts consultant for the Encyclopedia Britannica—but his view corroborates that of many dissident art historians today. They are trying to return the field to a branch of the humanities which has never been embarrassed by biography as an integral part of history. (Recent efforts along biographical lines are Paul Harper and Ralph Shikes's biography of Pissarro in 1980 and Barbara White's fact-laden life of Renoir, published last year; significantly, the Guggenheim Foundation has recently awarded a fellowship to the scholar Ruth Butler for a biography of Rodin.) For these histo-

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rians as John Shearman, chairman of Princeton's Department of Art and Archaeology, put it, "'the new art history' is really the old art history."

Mr. McMullen wants "to understand Degas by placing him in his social class and historical context." He does this by staying as close as possible to primary sources in Degas's own hand and to the testimonials of those who knew the artist. Thus, he leans heavily on thirty-seven extant notebooks which the artist kept from the 1850s to the early 1880s. These were published and edited in their entirety for the first time by Theodore Reff nine years ago, a revised edition appearing only last year. The notebooks are an impressive mass of fragmentary evidence alluding to Degas's evolving thoughts and plans of action. They include lists, memoranda, meditations, descriptions, and an extraordinary variety of drawings, from scatological graffiti to academic renderings. They are of capital importance, not only to artists, but to anyone wanting to know how artists develop. In many ways the notebooks are the key to knowing Degas. Unlike the letters, which were written by a solitary in order to reach out to others—and, above all, to be read by them—the notebooks reveal a privileged domain of calm self-absorption. Reading them is reminiscent of the psychological effect Degas achieved in so many works of art, where the viewer feels unmistakably implicated in an action of which he knows neither origin nor outcome.

Halting sentences in Notebook 6 (1856) suggest an early sexual experience fraught with anguish; feeling the artist's pain, one guiltily reads on. Notebook 18 (1859-62) shows the origins of what Degas came to care about in his finished work. In the 1850s the Parisian spectacle was very much on his mind, and he drew young women at the public dancing garden, Mabille, brazenly flinging their crinolines into the air for male admirers. Responding with equal intensity to the marvels of the countryside, on a page sketched with a tree, he listed, one after the other, as many of the "infinite variety of greens" as he was able to discern. Mr. McMullen examined the notebooks in order to establish for the first time their significance in the larger picture of Degas's existence. This is certainly the most exhilarating aspect of the biography.

Mr. McMullen also weaves Degas's letters into his tapestry. Originally published in 1945, they are still incomplete, although Professor Reff has promised a complete edition. In their chronological order the letters suggest a skeletal biography, especially of Degas's social self, with his quips, rages, apologies, self-pity, compassion. There is parody in the letters, too, at times of unexpected force, as when his contempt for Realism's literary hyperbole leads him to lampoon the Goncourt style. In response to the gift of a pumpkin, he writes: "It's there. I looked at it again this morning—at its red loins and creased buttocks."

In addition to these documents, there are the seemingly countless, scattered testimonials that make of Degas a walking, talking paradox. Boulanger-Cavé—through Daniel Halévy—reported that Degas treated ballet girls "as if they were his own children, . . . excused everything they did, laughed at everything they said." If the artist's confidences with his models were sometimes pathetic—"How many times a night do you have to get up to piss?"—his conversations with intimates could be a trip through barbed wire. Concerning Renoir and Monet, he asked Caillebotte: "Do you invite such people to your home?" The indignities, which kept the Goncourt brothers faithful to their journal, Degas ruefully paraded through the drawing rooms of the Rouarts, Halévys, and Morisot-Manets.

His maladies were real, but dismissible at will. Paul Valéry reports that Degas's deteriorating eyesight made it necessary for Zoé to read to him from the newspapers, including, during the Dreyfus Affair, the anti-Semitic raving of *La Libre Parole*. (Mr. McMullen determines, undoubtedly aided by an ophthalmologist, that the eye trouble was in fact "some kind of lesion or chronic infection in the retina, . . . neither an incipient cataract nor one of the common

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sorts of deformation of the lens.") Degas aggravated this weakness by living in a damp bastion while serving in the Franco-Prussion War. But during the 1890s, while posing for a photographic self-portrait, the artist donned a pair of tinted spectacles in order to stare into the fiery chamber of an oil lamp for the quarter-hour exposure time he determined for the pose. The photograph is one of Degas's best, and yet it is staggering to hear him lamenting to a friend in 1900, "For the past eight days I have been unable to see."

All this only begins to suggest the density of material with which Mr. McMullen has worked in reconstituting, as Valéry observed, a character "of the most intelligent unfairness, the most infallible taste, the narrowest and at the same time the most lucid passions."

Degas develops chronologically in twenty-two chapters. The first few (regarded by another reviewer as a "sluggish start") contain some of the most insightful writing on Degas anywhere. Mr. McMullen plunges into a profile of Degas's social class, and for the first time sorts through the family tree in order to understand how the artist's "ideological web was spun." There are the formidable grandfathers, René-Hilaire Degas and Germain Musson, and the difficulties between Degas's parents, the "exotic and romantic" couple on the rue Saint-Georges. Degas's mother was a Creole from Louisiana, his father a banker, half French, half Italian. Mr. McMullen examines the ménage for its tensions and reflects upon the nearly all-male family that nurtured the sensitive boy after his mother's early death. We also get a long explanation, refreshingly early in the book, of the "de" in Degas. We learn that this "nobiliary particle" had nothing to do with actual nobility in the Degas family, staunch grande bourgeoisie of the July Monarchy, but with that "yen" for the aura of aristocracy, the icing on the cake of comfort. (Half of these appellations in France at the time were false, Mr. McMullen asserts.) After tracing the many branches of the family, he brings down the curtain of his "genealogical tour" by announcing that the parish register in Orléans that lists the birth of the artist's grandfather, René-Hilaire, also lists the great-grandfather, Pierre Degast —*baker.*

Considering the quantity of facts, Mr. McMullen's book moves along well, with the exception of the sections on the Impressionist exhibitions, which have the fine detail of John Rewald's classic accounts, but share with them a certain turgidity. Clearly Mr. McMullen's passion is verification: he squelches false rumors, elucidates Degas's repeated memories (for example, the circumstances of his having "held Ingres in his arms"). And his obsession is detail: Degas's spectacles had blue lenses; the tea he drank for bladder problems was made from cherry stems. All this seems extraneous, of course, but one quickly sees that such matters are part of this biographer's palette and not only provide the book's delightfully rich atmosphere of "life and times" but, better yet, pin down the particularity of the subject. Mr. McMullen's need to include verges now and then on a rather endearing helplessness: a discussion of Realism and the role of the café as a forum for debate leads him to say that coffee, after all, was ever so much better by then, the percolator having been invented by 1856!

Such accretion of detail is the achievement of a dedicated ferret, but the book could not stand without its magnificent organization. Mr. McMullen's *Britannica* experience obviously served him well. He traces the pattern of changing prices for Degas's pictures, and chronicles the artist's many vacations, where he went and with whom. Scholars will be happy to find the addresses of Degas's many studios and residences (and those of his family) finally chronological and complete.

Because everything has assumed a proper place in the author's conception of the story as a whole, old and familiar stories seem fresh and the biographies of other figures are comfortably subsumed into Degas's. In an account of his friend Paul Valpinçon we are reminded that the artist was able to

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study horses not only at the racetrack but also at the beautiful Valpinçon stud farm. Every picture discussed in the book is the occasion for information, such as *Carriage at the Races,* which shows Valpinçon and his black bulldog silhouetted against the sky, along with two women, one a wet-nurse who holds a sleeping child. (Given their distinctly working-class features, neither woman seems a portrayal of Mme Valpinçon, contrary to what Mr. McMullen suggests.) An amusing description of Degas's painting *La Source,* depicting a ballet starring Eugénie Fiocre, soon leads to a full account of Fiocre's life and career. The dancing master Jules Perrot gets the same treatment; it is wonderful to hear of the early triumphs of the white-haired man in the paintings.

Certain chapters in the book break the chronology in order to address central problems of Degas's character. A distinguished chapter entitled "The Celibate" weighs the evidence (a lot of it) concerning Degas's sexual restraint, and discusses it in terms of nineteenth-century male socialization and sexual politics. It is one of the most moving sections of the book because Mr. McMullen skillfully brings so many issues to bear on the problem without forcing every piece into place. Similarly, in "The Affair," he treats the Dreyfus case at length, in order to show how a phenomenon of national paranoia infiltrated personal relations. He thereby clarifies much regarding Degas's anti-Semitism and "unfairness" in destroying many old friendships.

The book's great virtue is in its synthesizing of widely dispersed specialized studies. Although it is surprising to find so few new sources in *Degas*—nearly all documents or newspaper accounts are cited via Lemoisne, Boggs, Pickvance, Raimondi, Broude, Millard, Reff, and other Degas luminaries, whose own ferreting discovered them firs
he does prove himself an effective sieve, drawing the juice from remote sources. Unfortunately, the sources for information of general biography and history are not given often enough. (Mr. McMullen's biography of Whistler, published in 1973, also suffered from an eccentric and inadequate system of source crediting.) We must assume that some biographical dictionaries, and surely the crucial Larousse *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle,* provided certain delicious details on Fiocre, Perrot, and many of the friends and acquaintances who drifted through Degas's life. With a monument of a book so dependent on the stones of fact, the reader misses the mortar of extensive citation.

By the end of *Degas* we have a three-dimensional portrait of the artist and his times. But the author's ambition surpasses even this. In the book's "Preface," Mr. McMullen envisions Degas as an "exemplar of the kind of society that emerged after Waterloo and almost disappeared after Sarajevo." Knowing about Degas, we are told, gives us greater insight into the creative process and our socio-cultural history. I am not convinced that we get anything more from this biography than a rich reconstruction of a complex and contradictory individual. By virtue of Mr. McMullen's very gift for particularizing him, Degas is not, in the end, "representative." As for the creative process, it is experienced best by the close examination of the work in relation to the artist's notebooks, or by such obsessively visual studies as *Edgar Degas: The Painter as Printmaker,* which, if not exactly readable, permits the viewer virtually to look over the artist's shoulder.

It is unfortunate that Houghton Mifflin, the publisher of *Degas,* did not respond to the special documentary interest of Mr. McMullen's text with illustrations that do it justice. The predictable reproductions, all in black and white, are clearly points of reference. But there are works discussed in the book for which no illustration is given, and that is always a cause for dismay. Since this is not an "art book" in the usual sense but instead a work of history, its visual component might have included reproductions of letters, pages from the notebooks, photographs from the period of the places Degas lived, etc. These would have reflected the new territory of the text.

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Ultimately one wonders what significance a book like this has in illuminating Degas's work. The situation recalls Paul Valéry's battle with biography while attempting to write about Leonardo: he decided that the best way to serve the artist was to leave out as much as possible of his life. "Consequently, no mistresses, no creditors, no anecdotes, no adventures!" Valéry wanted a more "honest method." For Leonardo that meant conceiving of "a theoretical being, a psychological model . . . which represented one's capacity for reconstructing the work to be explained." Valéry wanted to avoid the usual assumption that the artist, as the documented hero of a novel, had been the *cause* of the work.

In Mr. McMullen's biography we have the opposite aim. But it seems exactly right, even necessary, for understanding Degas's work that we should know about the man in the terms the biographer sets out for us. Valéry's "author" had to be invented. "Fortunately the author is never the man," he wrote. In Degas's case the world in which he lived was the very material of his art. The coincidence of "artist" and "man" here is essential. The gents in top hats backstage may as well be "the celibate." Degas's notion of narrative is to implicate not only the viewer but, by extension, himself. Renaissance art imposed a necessary psychological distance between the world of the viewer and the work's distilled perfection. Degas's art as a whole constitutes a calculated attack on this grand tradition. That we be given the richest possible biography of him is essential for our gaining the proper insight into his work's modern mentality. Courbet's decision in the 1840s and 1850s to become, as it were, the hero of his own novel permitted artists ever after to make of their work some kind of biography. Thus, the shape and content of Degas's work derives from the drawing rooms that unconditionally received the aging bachelor with the sharp tongue. To know the texture of the carpets, the smell of the velour, the starch of the antimacassars, is to enter into the true spirit of the pictures. Degas's art is founded on the caprices of perceptual experience, however classical the distillation. The more detail we have about it the better.

This past year we have seen the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Degas's birth celebrated with a series of wonderful exhibitions, in France, Italy, Germany, and America. Roy McMullen's biography was perhaps the first garland bestowed on Degas's memory. What a pity that the author, who died while the book was still in production, will not be able to enjoy the accolades due him, or to see the effects of his labors on subsequent scholarship, for this biography will surely color the present efforts of the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to produce the grand Degas retrospective projected for 1988.

In *Degas,* Mr. McMullen has created a portrait, perhaps even an "exemplar," but he would not have deluded himself about his contribution to the reputation of his combative subject. "We painters do not have synthesizing minds," Degas himself reminds us. "And yet in a way we do, more than we seem to. In a single stroke of the brush we can say more than a literary man can in a volume."

Feminism and literature

Elaine Showalter, editor The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Pantheon, 403 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Carol Iannone

As feminist ideology would have it, the world presents a harsh and alien landscape to woman. Shaped against her grain by a tradition that has left her true identity out of account, she must articulate her very grievances in a language created by her oppressor. Inevitably, in the feminist view, literature itself mirrors this oppression. Thus, the feminist literary critic sees the traditional liter-

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ary canon as a "culture-bound political construct" and literary posterity as nothing more than a "group of men with the access to publishing and reviewing that enabled them to enforce their views of 'literature' and to define a group of ageless 'classics.'" Given the profound illegitimacy at the heart of literary tradition, the feminist critic insists upon "a complete revolution of our literary heritage"—"a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experience." In this way gender is established "as a fundamental category of literary analysis."

Such is the view of literary culture presented in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory,* a collection edited by Elaine Showalter, professor of English at Princeton University. The collection consists of "eighteen of the most important and controversial essays written by pioneers in the field [of feminist literary criticism] over the last decade." Contributors include such prominent feminist critics as Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, Annette Kolodny, Nancy K. Miller, Lillian S. Robinson, and Showalter herself, who is responsible for the views quoted above. These essays detail the possibilities for a "female aesthetic," a "gynocritics" as Showalter terms it, comprising "women's culture" and specifically female literary forms and critical models. They also address the function of feminist criticism in the academy.

While there is no firm agreement on the exact nature of the "female aesthetic," it is indeed the governing principle of the book. In "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," Annette Kolodny argues that the artistic obscurity of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers"—two short stories by early twentieth-century American writers—was due to society's failure to appreciate them as encodements of "women's imaginative universe." In "Sentimental Power," Jane P. Tompkins denounces the traditional aesthetic dismissal of sentimentality as a male formulation and attempts to advance Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a higher artistic plane. In "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," Nancy K. Miller isolates the moments of defiance against the "dominant" culture in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and comes to read "everywhere [in this novel] a protest against the division of labor that grants men the world and women love." For Lillian S. Robinson—in "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon"—it would appear to be the "female aesthetic" alone that makes "women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and private poetry" significant subjects for scholarly attention. The most obvious embodiment of a "female form" in the book is Rachel Blau DuPlessis's essay, "For the Etruscans," an attempt at "nonlinear," non-discursive criticism that weaves personal experience with wide-ranging meditations on literature.

As this sampling of articles may suggest, the collection offers a fairly good demonstration of the liabilities of the feminist approach to literature. No amount of theorizing, for example, can disguise the fact that "nonlinear"—when applied to intellectual scholarship—is a euphemism for confused, evasive, and inconclusive. But the problems are not just formal ones. How does anti-sentimentality come to be a male construct any more than a female one? And since when is *The Mill on the Floss* a novel about the contemporary feminist view of the female dilemma? Clearly, feminist politics are the touchstone of this criticism, and every explanation must follow therefrom, no matter what damage it does to our understanding of the complexity of art. Inevitably, the feminists discredit their own efforts through political urgency. It is not politics, after all, that will obtain higher artistic status for writers like Glaspell and Gilman, assuming they are proper candidates for literary revaluation. But of course, without the constraints of traditional literary aesthetics, the possibilities for revision are endless. Annette Kolodny even dismisses the "recurrent de-

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lusion" that there are universal truths—although she does not explain on what basis she can then make so confident a statement.

In spite of the obvious political character of this approach to literature, and despite its critical distortions, feminist literary criticism has found a home in the academy. Showalter claims that "the increased power of feminist perspectives within the university has led to innumerable changes in literary textbooks, in curriculum structure, and in the publication of articles and books." Some three hundred colleges and universities now offer degree options in women's studies. In addition, many new journals of feminist thought have sprung up, some, like *Signs* and *Feminist Studies,* with respectable academic backing. General academic periodicals of the stature of *PMLA* and *Critical Inquiry* have also granted generous space to feminist criticism. Moreover, Showalter claims, feminism is forging alliances with other modern critical schools. "Feminist, black, and post-structural critics, both male and female" now comprise an "avant-garde that shares the same enemies, namely those who urge a return to the 'basics' and the 'classics,'" those who fail to recognize in these new schools of criticism a virtual "renaissance" in the humanities. As Sandra Gilbert describes it, feminism is only one of a series of "profound changes that have recently shaken Western culture in general and English departments in particular"; among them, "open enrollment, the sixties, . . . extra sections of remedial English, . . . and a whole new literary canon, including not just the works of Borges in translation and the novels of Virginia Woolf but also science fiction, films, women's literature, black literature, Chicano literature, Asian-American literature, native-American literature, and more, much more."

While forging their new approach, feminist critics met their most obvious resistance in the form of male colleagues supposedly terrified by alterations in a canon that had, in Annette Kolodny's words, "previously reified [their] sense of power and significance in the world." Nevertheless, according to Showalter, the resistance of male critics is easing now as they begin to concede that "literary misogyny can no longer be overlooked or excused." Thus, some of the classics "now seem less heroic," as one Lawrence Lipking observes to Elaine Showalter, "and some of them less funny." In the words of a male medievalist quoted by Gilbert, "Everything has to be done again."

Despite Showalter's celebration of the triumph of feminism in the academy, however, a number of critics in the collection insist that feminism is being granted only token acceptance, and they have a point. Indeed, what kind of serious dialogue can emerge with a critical school that considers literature by women the "cultural manifestation of an oppressed people"? Gilbert herself suggests that even "apparently supportive colleagues only support feminist criticism because it is 'in,' it is popular, it is trendy."

The truth is that the academy has not so much accepted feminist criticism as it has simply capitulated to it. Like feminism generally, literary feminism encourages a kind of intellectual blackmail, according to which objections to feminist theory and practice can only derive from sexism, male paradigms, masculine aesthetics, "literary misogyny," etc. Moreover, by demanding a wholesale revisionism, feminist critics have flaunted what amounts to an incapacity to work creatively with the varying weights and nuances of tradition. They have placed themselves outside the values and standards that have traditionally governed intellectual discourse and academic debate; thus their "acceptance" is of necessity only a nominal one.

These tactics may well betray feminism's lurking suspicion of its own illegitimacy, since no valid intellectual position can be entirely beyond all procedures of verifiability. Perhaps feminists have dismissed tradition—in favor of a reductive and bullying ideology—because they sense that they can't demand the status they want, for themselves and women generally, on the usual grounds. "Male-dominated" though the Western tra-

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dition may be, it has always granted both sexes the possibility of transcending gender—in religion, for example, or in literature itself. Indeed, those detested classics became classics precisely because they transcended the ordinary life of their times and addressed themselves to (yes) universal truths. Furthermore, women *have* enjoyed various forms of power, although not always those forms favored by contemporary feminism. It is feminism that presents an extraordinarily withered view of feminine history, by focusing only on female deprivation and ignoring female fulfillment. And it is feminism that has transformed gender—in literary studies as elsewhere—from a merely biological imperative into a totalitarian determinism that would resist all the qualifications of centuries of culture. Elaine Showalter's counsel that feminist criticism has "more to learn from women's studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters" can only result in impoverishing women scholars, exacerbating any real alienation from which they may suffer, ghettoizing them, setting them apart as a subspecies, as prisoners of sex.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for guarded optimism. Two recent debates in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* would seem to indicate that many thoughtful women—women writers in particular—do not accept the interests of ideological feminism as identical with their own, or the methods of feminist literary criticism as the best means of understanding either literature in general or literature by women in particular.

The first debate began with an essay by the ubiquitous Elaine Showalter objecting to the resistance of many women writers—Joan Didion, Doris Lessing, Susan Sontag, Iris Murdoch, and Cynthia Ozick—to the idea of a female literary tradition. In a reply, Ozick noted the contradiction in feminists' lamenting "the exclusion of women writers from the 'cultural mainstream' while simultaneously supporting their exclusion through insistence on 'women's writing as a distinct literary category.'" Another female respondent argued that writing and reading by gender narrows the focus of how we create and enjoy art.

The second debate involved Gail Godwin's review of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women,* edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in addition to being contributors to the present collection, are the authors of the seminal work on the so-called female literary tradition, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* Godwin—a novelist of considerable reputation—protested that their anthology elevated "the values of feminist interpretation . . . to a *summa* at the expense of literary art and individual talents," and that women writers, especially younger ones, "whose prose or poems do not always deal with the female experience or lend themselves to feminist explication," had been virtually ignored. Furthermore, Godwin observed, even renowned writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot were represented in the anthology by lesser work (in Austen's case by a spoof she wrote as a teenager) because these fit better into the "feminist pattern" Gilbert and Gubar were "attempting to impose."

Godwin was met by a wave of angry responses from the editors of the book and from other major feminist literary critics. One respondent, Joanne Feit Diehl, predictably characterized Godwin's view as "the resistance of a woman writer who is herself at odds concerning her relationship to a tradition of other women"—such resistance being of course for feminists the only grounds from which disagreement with their ideas can spring. But in her reply Godwin reported receiving many supportive letters from women readers and writers.

Ironically, if feminism would define itself, as Godwin suggests, as a celebration of "women's strengths and opportunities"—or, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, as the desire for "access to, and participation in, the professions, the arts and every other human enterprise that makes the world go"—then it would be at odds with the aspirations of

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the new feminist criticism as represented in Elaine Showalter's collection. Such a view would have to presume women's capacities for thriving within their cultural tradition and would eventually have to acknowledge the representation women have had in that tradition even to this point. Perhaps this is why feminist critics are driving themselves to such egregious violations of common sense and scholarly standards as are shown in *The New Feminist Criticism*: not because women haven't had cultural status, but because they have, and it has failed to bring about the utopia of the feminists' dreams.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to two recently published books by contributors to *The New Criterion*: James Lord's *Giacometti: A Biography* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $30), and Hilton Kramer's *The Revenge of the Philistines: Art & Culture 1972-1984* (The Free Press, $25). Parts of these books were published in earlier issues of *The New Criterion*.

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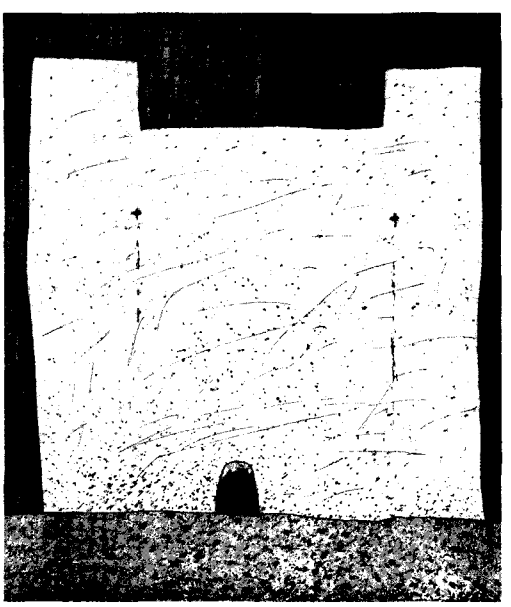

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Letters

The new Whitney Museum

To the Editors:
Re: "The Whitney's New Graves," by Hilton Kramer (September, 1985).

I am writing in this matter not as a disinterested party. First as a trustee of the Whitney Museum of American Art and second as a member of the National Council on the Arts on which I serve together with *The New Criterion*'s publisher, Mr. Samuel Lipman.

In the latter capacity I share many of the same principles and objectives of Mr. Lipman and his colleagues at *The New Criterion* as well as fellow appointees to the National Council. Foremost among these is a dedication to excellence in the arts and high standards of purpose and professionalism.

For that reason it concerns me when I find an extensive critique that belies these standards by the editor of a journal which so scrupulously exacts them from others. Needless to say, my own involvement with the Whitney will make my comments suspect. But, perhaps because I am so closely informed I am better able to perceive the lack of background work or scholarly balance brought to the subject at hand.

Mr. Kramer, quite naturally, has every right to his own opinion.. He obviously does not like the "Graves" solution to the much needed Whitney expansion. So be it. Perceptions and tastes vary. An example in an area more directly in Mr. Kramer's purview, neither does he admire the painter Phillip Guston whose exhibitions he likewise savaged ("silly," "clumsy," "demotic," "stumblebum" etc.) at key junctures of his career. That Phillip Guston's work since that time has emerged as one of the icons of American painting with enormous influence on work being done by many artists today has left Mr. Kramer unmoved. He has stuck by his guns. So much then for the vagaries of taste and an open mind.

Most glaringly it is the openness of mind that causes me much the greatest concern. Mr. Kramer who has been perceived by many as the aesthetic mandarin of the new political right stumbles over *his* very personal aesthetic prejudices in his rush to judgment. Using the Whitney expansion as a handy foil he launches an attack first on the Graves design, then with innuendo (the Gail Levin departure) and total lack of the most rudimentary acknowledgement of the Whitney's achievements in art scholarship, he focuses upon the Morgan Russell papers imbroglio, without making any reference to the recent extensive monographs and exhibitions on Avery, Hartley, DeKooning, Crawford, to cite but a few, nor the Whitney Symposiums on American Art, the Tandy lectures nor the Whitney Independent Study Program and so on.

With calculated disdain he belittles and impugns the generously given corporate sponsorship of branch museums ("art boutiques" he calls them), again failing to point out the widespread recognition of their curatorial experimentation and achievement, attested to not only by a growing audience, artists and the press, but most particularly the museum field with institutions throughout the nation requesting that the branch museum shows be traveled to their facilities for

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exhibition and following the Whitney's lead, in setting up their own branches.

His attack on the Whitney Biennial ignores the exhibition's objectives. The aim of the Biennial is to display and summarize the works of art and ideas that have dominated the visual arts during the prior two years. Such a selection requires choices, of course, but in essence it is a report of the work being done in the field meant to inform not enshrine, as Mr. Kramer would have us believe.

Mr. Kramer now at the height of his indignation uses the Biennial as a vehicle to attack not simply the Whitney, but contemporary art. It would appear that to Mr. Kramer almost all that is happening in contemporary art is distasteful, vulgar, superficial, etc., and it is not simply the Whitney, but any institution, be it the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, the New Museum etc., that dares exhibit or deal with those issues of importance to artists today. "Today" seems to be the root of Mr. Kramer's problem, not the institutions.

In that I am addressing an issue of direct interest to the editor of *The New Criterion,* I feel it not inappropriate to quote from the President's recent remarks at the National Medal of the Arts ceremony, which Mr. Lipman and I attended.

"In an atmosphere of liberty, artists and patrons are free to think the unthinkable and create the audacious; they are free to make horrendous mistakes and glorious celebrations. Where there's liberty, art succeeds!" Words that wouldn't look bad even on the title page of *The New Criterion.*

Raymond J. Learsy
New York City

Hilton Kramer replies:

We must be grateful to Mr. Learsy for writing this extraordinary letter to *The New Criterion.* Seldom, if ever, is the public vouchsafed such a vivid and candid display of the kind of thinking which governs the deliberations of the Whitney Museum's board of trustees on matters affecting that institution's policies and objectives. In offering us this interesting specimen of boardroom cerebration, Mr. Learsy has made a welcome contribution to our understanding of the crisis which has overtaken the museum under its current leadership—though it is not, perhaps, precisely the contribution that he had in mind to make.

It tells us much, for example, that on the issue which is now paramount both for the Whitney's board of trustees and for the museum's many critics—namely, the program that calls for a vast expansion of the Whitney's facilities and the fate to be suffered by the Marcel Breuer building in the execution of that program—Mr. Learsy has nothing to say. Neither the name of Marcel Breuer nor the building he created for the Whitney Museum less than two decades ago is so much as mentioned by this trustee who claims to be "so closely informed" about the museum's affairs. This, I think, can be taken as an accurate measure of the consideration the board has given the fate of the Breuer building—which is to say, no consideration at all. Mr. Learsy, like other members of the Whitney board, seems to assume, moreover, that this attitude of indifference about the Breuer building is widely shared. But this is very far from being the case—as even he, at this late date, must now be aware. Apparently the "closely informed" Mr. Learsy, who sent us his letter of October 3rd, had not yet caught up with the fact that on October 2nd a petition opposing the expansion program and bearing the names of more than six hundred artists, architects, and writers—among them, according to a report in *The New York Times,* those of Edward Larrabee Barnes, I. M. Pei, Isamu Noguchi, and Arthur Miller—was delivered to the Whitney for presentation to its board. Surely even at the beleaguered Whitney the arrival of such an extraordinary appeal cannot be regarded as a routine occurrence. Yet twenty-four hours after the event this "closely informed" member of the board who claims to speak in the name of "issues of importance to artists today" had yet to hear of this historic challenge to the museum's program from some of the nation's leading artists. It would appear that some "closely informed" members of the Whitney board are less closely informed than others.

Mr. Learsy has every right, of course, to defend the Michael Graves plan for the expansion of the museum. It might even have been interesting to hear what he had to say on this subject. But he offers no word on the Graves plan. And if he really believes that it is right and proper for the

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Whitney, which commissioned the Breuer building, to destroy it now in the interest of the expansion program, then he had a right to say that, too. But on this issue—which was, after all, the issue which occasioned the article he purports to reply to in his letter—he is all but silent. Except for a single, facile reference to "the much needed Whitney expansion"—as if this were not the principal matter under contention and therefore the subject most in need of some illuminating intelligence—he simply ignores the whole issue.

What, then, does Mr. Learsy concern himself with in lieu of the main issue? The answer, alas, is: *The New Criterion* and the views of its editor. Now under other circumstances it might be flattering, I suppose, to be made the subject of a lengthy communiqué from a figure who claims so eminent a place in the councils of the nation's cultural life. Yet on this subject, too, Mr. Learsy shows himself to be incapable of conducting either a reasoned argument or an even minimally informed discussion. Straightaway he invokes the work of "Phillip" (sic) Guston, who is said to have "emerged as one of the icons of American painting" but whose name, despite its iconic status, Mr. Learsy nonetheless has trouble getting exactly right. Guston, to be sure, was never mentioned in the article in question. Yet, eager to shift the ground of the discussion, Mr. Learsy introduces this name quite as if the art it represents were now safely beyond critical dispute—as if, indeed, the nature of Guston's "enormous influence on work being done by many artists today" were not one of the most problematical issues in the art of the present moment. No doubt it will come as a shock to Mr. Learsy to learn that in the big world which lies beyond the parochial precincts of the Whitney, neither Guston's art nor its influence is as universally admired or beloved as he seems to believe.

For Mr. Learsy, the fact that the Whitney has embraced and promoted a certain kind of art, both in the Biennials and in other exhibitions, is more than sufficient to settle all critical questions concerning that art—and art in general. This attitude undoubtedly stands him in good stead as a member of the Whitney's board, but as a way of assessing the achievements of contemporary art it is ludicrous, of course, and betrays not only a remarkable ignorance about the art scene at large but a fundamental incapacity to understand what the tasks of art criticism entail. It was precisely out of a need to describe such a myopic—not to say opportunistic—approach to contemporary cultural issues, which gleefully substitutes the talismans of fashion for the standards of criticism, that the term *trendiness* had, perforce, to be coined. It therefore comes as no surprise that when Mr. Learsy addresses himself to the unpleasant subject of the Whitney Biennial, it is only on the grounds of fashion that he can think of making any sort of case for the exhibition. Wrapping himself in the mantle of something called "Today," Mr. Learsy follows the Whitney lead in assuming that the real achievements of contemporary art are only to be found in the kind of carnival tackiness the museum is now so fatally enamoured of. This, to say the least, is not a position which can be taken seriously by anyone who really knows what is happening in contemporary art. This whole notion of "Today," as Mr. Learsy and his colleagues at the Whitney define it, is entirely spurious—a fiction spawned by the juggernaut of publicity—and it is precisely because the Whitney has shown itself incapable of applying any other standard to its professional affairs that its name is now seriously compromised, its credibility shattered, and its future in doubt.

A mind so totally hostage to this debased notion of "Today" cannot, moreover, be expected to have the slightest glimmer of an understanding of what the concept of scholarship actually means, or of where the Whitney's institutional responsibilities in the field of scholarship may lie. Certainly Mr. Learsy appears not to grasp even the rudiments of this aspect of the discussion. Though he may not know it, the sad fact is that the Whitney now has little, if any, connection with serious historical scholarship in American art. Virtually all of the most important work in this field is being done elsewhere, and what Mr. Learsy blithely refers to as "the Morgan Russell imbroglio" guarantees that this will continue to be the case. The Morgan Russell donation was a crucial test of the museum's commitment to serious scholarly research. The Whitney had accepted responsibility for an important archive of unpublished material concerning the career of an artist who had been

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associated with the museum since its founding. It then promptly forfeited its right to this material. The fact that a member of the Whitney board of trustees does not even now, in the aftermath of the debacle, understand the implications of this lamentable episode is very bad news indeed.

What is finally most dismaying about Mr. Learsy's letter is not even his own ignorance of the issues under discussion, but his transparent attempt to create a diversion—to shift the focus of the controversy away from the Whitney and its responsibilities, and make the views of the museum's critics the subject of the debate. This discreditable strategy is bound to fail, however, for while spokesmen like Mr. Learsy are busying themselves with the task of impugning the museum's critics, the Whitney's own reputation has collapsed in ruins. Sooner or later—and the sooner the better, of course—it is to this ghastly situation that Mr. Learsy and his fellow board members will have to turn their attention.

Mr. Learsy's pious invocation of President Reagan displays an ignorance of our freedom as lamentable as his ignorance of art. Even for Mr. Learsy, there surely ought to be a difference evident between the right to have poor taste and its *a priori* justification. The problem of the Whitney and its expansion plan is not illegality but wretched standards.

Correction

To the Editors:

In his very gracious article "Robert Venturi and the Decorated Shed" in the May issue of *The New Criterion,* William Jordy made a slight error. On Page sixty-seven, he discusses the façade of the Seattle Art Museum. In this context, we believe he means the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, Texas, which is currently being designed by our office.

The façade of the Seattle Art Museum has not yet been designed, since this project is in the very early stages of programming.

James Bradberry
Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown
Philadelphia, PA

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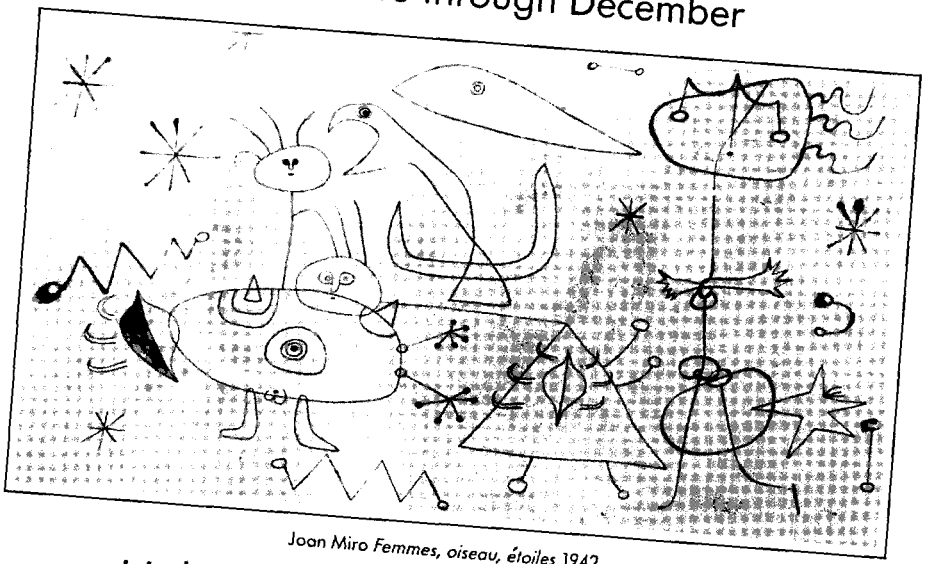

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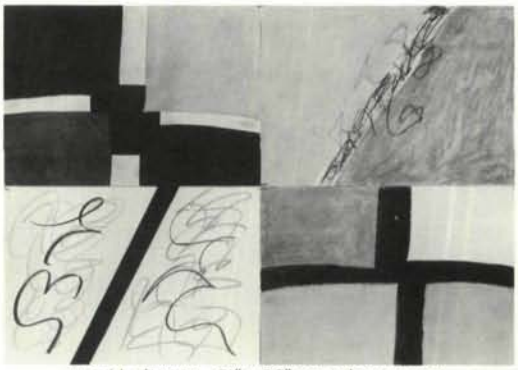

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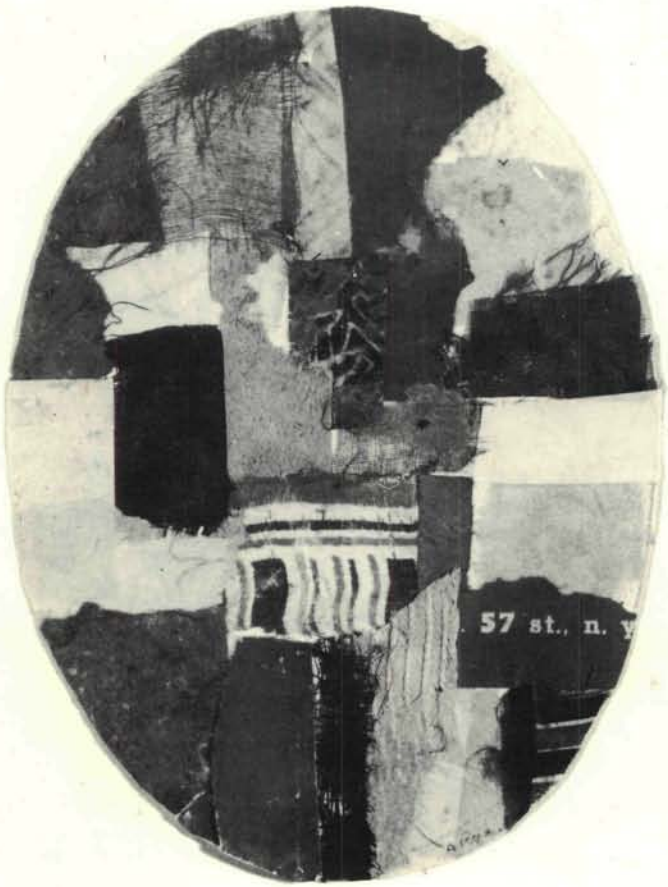

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